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# GRADUATE EMPLOYEES' WORK AND ORGANIZING IN TODAY'S UNIVERSITY: A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY APPROACH TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STRUGGLES

Michael Carl Ide

University of Kentucky, [enku.ide@uky.edu](mailto:enku.ide@uky.edu)

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Michael Carl Ide, Student

Dr. Shaunna L. Scott, Major Professor

Dr. Shaunna L. Scott, Director of Graduate Studies

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Michael Carl Ide

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Shaunna L. Scott, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology

Lexington, Kentucky

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### GRADUATE EMPLOYEES' WORK AND ORGANIZING IN TODAY'S UNIVERSITY: A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY APPROACH TO INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL STRUGGLES

This is a mixed-methods comparative study of union and non-union graduate employees' work experiences, following Wicken's (2008) call for additional research into the graduate union movement. I used focus group interviews, finding that non-unionized participants had significantly more negative views of their work and faculty members than unionized participants. Non-unionized participants were also more likely to display greater internalization of neoliberal views and neoliberal subjectivity, and were more likely to see their problems in fatalistic terms. I found increased activity with the union to be associated with both decreased fear and anxiety as well as an increased sense of personal and collective agency in relation to work. These findings are analyzed using new social movement theories as well as the concepts of civil society, hegemony and counterhegemony, and cognitive liberation.

I used quantitative data on employment trends in higher education institutions to investigate the concept of the neoliberal university, finding support for central claims of this concept: undergraduate education is increasingly reliant on part-time, un-tenured staff and graduate employees. I also quantitatively investigated the graduate employee union (GEU) movement at a nation-wide scale, finding many union local to conform to Fantasia and Stepan-Norris' (2007) concept of "social movement unionism."

**KEYWORDS:** Higher Education, Work, Organizations, Social Movements, Unions

"Enku" Michael C. Ide

July 23, 2012

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UNIVERSITY: A NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY APPROACH TO  
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By

Michael Carl Ide

Shaunna L. Scott  
*Director of Thesis*

Shaunna L. Scott  
*Director of Graduate Studies*

July 23, 2012

I dedicate this work to all graduate employees who have learned to speak their own language of liberation, and particularly those who have sacrificed their time, talents and energies to make the landscape of graduate employment more hospitable for human life and flourishing. A special dedication is given to the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my professors and advisors who have made this work possible through exposing me to and challenging me with the tools of our discipline, primarily my advisor and committee members at the University of Kentucky: Drs. Scott, Mooney, and Bell. They have been consistently helpful, encouraging, and patient through the emergent process of this research. A community of professors has molded me into a sociologist, a label bringing me great pride and a sense of responsibility to creating a more just and liberated society.

Aside from the invaluable help of these professors, I would like to thank my partner, Paul Michal Brown, for his constant understanding and support, particularly during the life-consuming final process of writing. He made sure that other parts of my life didn't wither on the vine by preparing and bringing me delicious and healthy food. He also provided plenty of hugs and shoulder-rubs to ease out the tensions of days of typing. He made continuing bearable.

Finally, I would like to thank the generous support of the National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP), which has provided time and resources to complete this study<sup>1</sup>.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: GRADUATE EMPLOYEES: NEOLIBERAL CONTEXTS, NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTS**

Although the process of graduate training is common for academics, many of us may not reflect deeply on the structure and trends of graduate education and how this structures our experiences, future careers and our selves. Being embedded in this process, it is difficult for many to form a “sociological imagination,” an understanding of how interrelated global, national, and institutional structures and dynamics shape our personal experiences (Mills 2001 [1959]: 1). Individuals are not static, but are constantly in a process of becoming. As graduate students, we study, train, and work with a constant preoccupation as to how these tasks will inform our future careers and selves.

As graduate students, who do we believe ourselves to be, and who do we imagine we will become? We are (re)born from our experiences and our shifting understandings of those experiences. These perceptions are formed within specific organizational and cultural contexts. In the case of graduate employee teaching assistants, the context of their work is the complex organizational structures and overlapping and divergent cultural spheres of the university. Further, organizational and cultural aspects of these institutions change over time in relation to both external and internal dynamics, including shifts in the political and economic structures in which they are embedded and internal struggles arising from competing ideas, values, and practices.

At ninety-two doctorate-granting university campuses in the United States, graduate employees have responded to these struggles by organizing graduate employee unions (GEUs) (NCSCBHEP 2012). An increase in organizing in the 1990s has been described by some scholars as the “graduate employee union movement” (Dixon et al. 2008: 379; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003: 176). Between 1990 and today, GEU membership

has grown by 308%, from 19,900 to 61,293<sup>2</sup> (Dixon et al. 2008; Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; NCSCBHEP 2012). Thus, graduate employee union density stands at 19.07%, considerably higher than overall union density in the United States, at 11.8% (NCSBHEP 1012; U.S. Department of Labor 2012)

GEUs add a new element to graduate employee teaching work. These organizations are both embedded within the university and autonomous from university hierarchies. They carry important implications for how graduate employee work is structured as well as for social relations among graduate employees and between graduate employees and other members of the university community. These organizations seek to affect both the university power structure and the cultural practices and policies within the university (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005).

In this study, I conducted four focus groups, two with non-unionized graduate employees and two with unionized graduate employees, to investigate both the presence of a GEU and increased activity with a GEU on graduate employees. Specifically, I examined how these affect graduate employees' work experiences, their understandings of their work within the university context, and their understandings of their personal and collective agency to create change in their universities' structures and cultures. I found that the presence of a GEU affected primarily graduate employees' work experiences, while increased activity with the GEU had a larger effect on how graduate employees understand their work and their agency.

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<sup>2</sup> The presented N and percentages are slightly different from those presented in (NCSCBHEP 2012), as I have excluded the recently decertified Teaching Assistants Association at the University of Wisconsin, containing 3,131 graduate employees.

### *Neoliberal contexts*

The 1990s upsurge in GEU organizing is has been credited to “changing labor conditions within the university” (Dixon et al. 2008: 380). Slaughter and Rhoades have described that universities have changed in ways “unprecedented in this century” beginning in the 1970s (1997: 2008). These dynamics in higher education institutions<sup>3</sup> are intimately tied to mutually-reinforcing, dialectically-related organizational structural changes and ideological shifts.

Current dynamics in work in higher education have been credited to an increasingly competitive, market-driven approach to organizing all areas of social life and thus amplifying dependence on the for-profit sector, labeled “neoliberalism,” replacing the ideal of the public good with individual responsibility (Harvey 2006: 10; Harvey 2005; Ouellette 2008). Neoliberalism reflects Marx’s insight into the tendency of capitalism to “nestle everywhere, settle everywhere” and “create new markets” through creating spheres of influence in new geographic and social spaces (2012 [1848]). This tendency can be understood as a colonization of the public sector by the private sector (Habermas 1981; Marx 2012 [1848]).

The state is not a neutral player in this transition, but serves primarily as “a committee for managing the common affairs” of capitalist leaders (Marx 2012 [1848]). Thus, states are responsible for facilitating the “privatization, deregulation, commodification, [and] depoliticization” of institutions which meet social needs (Harvey

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<sup>3</sup> Different institutional types respond to broad political and economic changes in different ways. For this study, the institutional type under examination is the public, doctorate-granting research university, as indicated by the Carnegie Classification System. This subset of institutions accounts for 6.1% of institutions of higher learning in the United States in which 22% of the current US student population is currently enrolled (including for-profit institutions). Working and studying in a doctoral institution is necessary for most faculty members regardless of institutional type. This, along with institutional isomorphism, indicates that the systemic and cultural dynamics operating at public research universities have ramifications for all institutional types.

2005: 2; Heery 2009: 205). These changes are primarily a response to corporations' needs to maximize profits, which have been undermined by deindustrialization and financialization of the United States economy<sup>4</sup> as economic systems have become increasingly global (Harvey 2005). The application of neoliberalism to the university is labeled the "neoliberal university" (Castree and Sparke 2000). While some orthodox versions of Marxist analysis may be wary of treating a public or semi-public institution as a profit-generating enterprise, neo-Marxist or "postmodern" Marxist scholars have addressed the "class processes"<sup>5</sup> and "internal class relations" of public-sector employment (Curtis 2001: 81; Also see Gibson-Graham 2001). As institutions of higher education, through neoliberal political projects, become more closely aligned with capitalist interests and leaders, these class processes and relations are intensified.

With decreases in state funding and an increased reliance on private capital, capitalist leaders have colonized the "communal space of academic freedom" through "flocking to education, [and] bringing with them a flood of dollars" (Castree and Sparke 2000: 223, 225). According to Castree and Sparke:

Businessmen...say they will turn the \$700 billion education sector into the next healthcare – that is, transform large portions of a fragmented, cottage industry of independent, nonprofit institutions into a consolidated, professionally managed, money-making set of businesses that include all levels of education. (2000: 225)

---

<sup>4</sup> Financialization refers to increasing percentages of the national and global economy based in fictitious capital, "money with no material basis, [and] a speculation on future economic performance" (Aronowitz and Difazzio 2010: xvi). These funds are created through financial services including credit and loan interests as opposed to profits produced in the labor process. As primary and secondary sector jobs (based in extraction and manufacturing industries) have been made redundant through industries' technological advances and outsourcing, we have witnessed thirty years of "wage stagnation and decline" through which working class people have stayed afloat via a "magnificent credit system that seemed to know no limits" (Aronowitz and Difazzio 2010: xvi). With the decline of these sectors, stable, long-term working class careers have been replaced (but not fully) with jobs marked by low wages and high turnover.

<sup>5</sup> Described by Curtis (2001: 81) as "production, extraction, and distribution of surplus labor."

Business investments in higher education channel previously-unproductive labor power<sup>6</sup> into productive (private profit-generating) relations of production. Increasingly, university operating costs are paid by student tuition dollars, corporate and public research grant monies, interest on endowment funds and stock derivatives in corporate firms, and donations (Curtis 2008: 89). Both reliance on tuition monies, often paid by students receiving loans, as well as reliance on interest and stock derivatives, embed universities into systems of financial capital. While an increased reliance on tuition-based revenue may lead to increased attention to education in relation to research, it is likely that a profit-centered focus on education will lead to an increase in student credit hours, leading to larger class sizes even if this undermines educational quality.

Dependence on corporate research grant monies and donations from business leaders for universities' financial reproduction conjoins the interests of higher education institutions with those of corporate enterprises and leaders.

Given this funding scheme, university policy must react to both internal political struggles and external economic pressures in order to “reproduce the college as both an academic institution and a capitalist enterprise” (Curtis 2001: 82, 81). These two forms of institutional reproduction may be complementary or in conflict. Business leaders have not stopped at simply holding the purse-strings of university institutions. They have also inserted themselves into the zenith of the university hierarchy, the boards of trustees, which act as a collective capitalist body to oversee their investments. According to

Wickens:

The current trend is for the highest governing body of a university to consist of managers and directors of top industrial and commercial corporations” and

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<sup>6</sup> In Marxist theory, labor which does not generate surplus-value is “unproductive.” See (Gibson-Graham et al. 2001: 8).

therefore, “it is no surprise that they govern the university in a similar fashion, ignoring the traditional academic focus on education and the advancement of knowledge in favor of the more corporate goal of amassing and storing great wealth. (2008: 4)

These corporate “managers and directors” set policies, hire and dismiss administrators and other workers, and approve curricular changes and tenure decisions. Universities’ non-profit status, a requisite for many areas of funding, limits how board members may benefit directly from university funds. However, the boards and administrators which oversee day-to-day operations on the board’s behalf determine how surplus value in the institution will be distributed (Curtis 2001: 83). Adapting to these new financial and political realities, education leaders have largely accepted, through design or survival-instinct, “the logic of accumulation, commodification, profit-maximization, [and] competition” (Etin 2005: 26).

A second component of the neoliberal university is an increasingly rigid hierarchy, consolidating and intensifying the power of boards of trustees and administrators and thus facilitating neoliberal restructuring. Early indications of the neoliberal university hierarchy were outlined by Dr. Kerr, president of the University of California, Berkeley, in 1963. Involvement in the Civil Rights Movement increased students’ understandings of political power and their own agency, and they applied these lessons to the university context through the free speech movement, demanding a right to form independent student political and social movements. Responding to these challenges, Dr. Kerr put forward his vision of the “multiversity,”<sup>7</sup> representing the “managerial revolution” on campus with administrators taking a “more prominent feature” of the university as the only position which could protect the institution from

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of the “multiversity” was first put forward by Dr. Clark Kerr, former University of California president, in a 1963 Godkin Lectures at Harvard University.



provincial interests and struggles among students and faculty members. As economic ties have become increasingly global, education leaders have re-imagined their institutions as “global research universities,” which they describe as “the multiversity, plus more research, much more mobility, global systems and global ranking” (Labi 2010). Such changes are most dramatic at public research universities, which set a standard for many institutions of higher education through institutional isomorphism (Slaughter and Leslie 1997: 5).

Increased administrative power implies decreases in faculty and student power within the university (Etin 2005). This has led to internal struggles based in competing interests between economic and educational ideals (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). These may manifest as fights over university governance and working conditions, as the teaching profession becomes increasingly managed (Slaughter and Rhodes 2000: 73). Administrators are relied upon to oversee and quantify the value to instructors’ work in the creation of a consumer product, thus alienating academic workers from the work process (Slaughter and Rhodes 2000: 761, 763; Aronowitz and Diffazio 2010).

A third element of the neoliberal university is an increased reliance on part-time, non-tenured staff and graduate employees for undergraduate education (Dowling 2008: 814; Slaughter and Rhodes 2000). Non-tenure-track instructors today teach the majority of undergraduate students in college campuses and (when including for-profit, private, and publically controlled institutions) account for 70% of all faculty positions (Dixon et al. 2007: 380; Etin 2005: 26). I verified these trends in reviewing statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). These data show that, although overall employment of instructional faculty in degree-granting institutions rose by 184% from

1987 to 2001, the majority of these gains were in part-time employment, which increased by 263% whereas full-time employment grew by 140% (U.S. Department of Education 2010b). Thus, in 2009, part-time instructors were approaching the numeric majority of instructional posts in these institutions (See Figure 1.1, p. 13). These data also show that tenure-rates among full-time instructional staff at doctorate-granting institutions have declined at every level of employment. Overall, the percentage of tenured and tenure-track instructional staff declined by 8.8% from 1993 to 2009 at an average yearly rate of 0.55%, from 54.5% to 45.7% (U.S. Department of Education 2010c). Thus, a majority of instructional staff now are non-tenured (See Figure 1.2, p. 13). Further, NCES data also show that from 1999 to 2009, rates of graduate teaching assistant employment outpaced the rate of faculty employment by 11.1%, decreasing the ratio of faculty to graduate assistants from 2.66 to 1.96 over this 10 year period (U.S. Department of Education 2010a) (See Figures 1.3 and 1.4, p. 14).

The demand for flexible, low-paid labor is a cornerstone of neoliberal policies that have influenced economic restructuring that cuts across industries and includes both public and private sectors (Ouellette 2008). This reliance on part-time and non-tenured instructional staff and graduate employee labor has been described as the “de-professionalization” and “proletarianization” of academic work, as these jobs often have little stability, few benefits, and decreasing opportunities for future employment and upward mobility (Aronowitz 1998: 161-162; Slaughter and Rhoades 2000: 73; Etin 2005: 73; Aronowitz and Difazzio 2010: 221). These changing employment patterns intensify teacher-worker exploitation (Moser 2001). That is, institutions’ tuition-income from each course is greater than the sum of the institution’s expenditures on the teachers’ salary and

other “academic means of production” necessary to the creation of the course (Curtis 2001: 84). The discrepancy is thus the surplus value created by university instructors which is “appropriated and distributed by trustee capitalists” (Curtis 2001: 83). The extraction of surplus value from one’s labor power places university teachers in the structural location of the Marxian proletariat (Curtis 2001: 81).

These changes in instructor employment relations have been described as an undervaluing of education in relation to research (Marsh and Hattie 2002; Fairweather 2005). Fairweather’s quantitative study (2005) showed that faculty salaries are significantly positively associated with research publications and significantly negatively associated with the number of hours spent in the classroom. Over the period of his study, from 1992 to 1998, this difference increased the most at doctorate-granting institutions (Fairweather 2005: 417). In seeing salaries as “an expression of institutional norms regardless of espoused mission,” Fairweather concludes that “teaching undergraduates is as undervalued as ever” (2005: 418, 403). Further, Marsh and Hattie’s investigation found, against common perception, that the quality of one’s research and teaching skills and activities are not necessarily correlated (2002: 635). Given this finding, institutions of higher education may be pushing highly effective teachers out of institutions of higher education because of a lack of research productivity, or only hiring them in part-time roles. These assessments are given a human face in Boice’s work, qualitatively detailing the isolation and pressures felt by new faculty members in relation to their teaching, summarized as a “sink or swim” approach by departmental chairs in terms of new faculty members teaching roles (1991: 173). Sacken cautions us to:

Remember that in the postsecondary institutions, interest in teaching is a persistent, generally innocuous myth that becomes dangerous only if its *symbolic*

*virtues* are misconstrued as *organizational imperatives*. (1990: 559 emphases added)

### *Neoliberal subjects*

Neoliberalism not only affects social structures, but it also relies on “cultural training” in which individuals internalize and replicate neoliberal subjectivity, or competitive individualism (Ouellette 2008: 233; Harvey 2005; Gonick 2006). Structural inequalities, unemployment, and poor working conditions must not be seen as structural, but rather as personal failures, “poor choices” and “insufficient effort” of those finding themselves in these situations, leading to self-blame and shame (Hasinoff 2008: 329; Gonick 2006; Ouellette 2008: 238). Facilitating this conceptualization, such structures must be understood as a meritocracy, with the requisite belief that “anyone who works hard can get ahead” (Gonick 2006: 6). In this formulation, the worker herself is commodified, and the subject-commodity is responsible for her own market value. Collective worker collaboration, organizing and bargaining with employers is in direct contradiction with neoliberal assumptions.

For workers, neoliberal subjectivity implies that they must be flexible, self-motivated and individually responsible in order to compete with other workers. The demand for such traits must be understood in relation to power dynamics within the workplace. For example, these traits may be functional in professional work situations which are autonomous and self-directed and in which the worker’s mastery or expertise provides the professional worker sufficient power to diminish or negate domination and exploitation (Aronowitz 2005). Thus, neoliberal subjectivity is “made in the image of the middle class” (Gonick 2006: 16). For workers who find themselves in work situations of

domination and exploitation, individualization which underpins demands for flexibility, self-motivation, and individual responsibility is used to increase their domination and exploitation. These workers must “reinvent themselves for the labor market” and their employers’ demands and not challenge unjust practices and inequalities (Hasinoff 2008: 329; Aronowitz and Difazio 2010; Sender 2006).

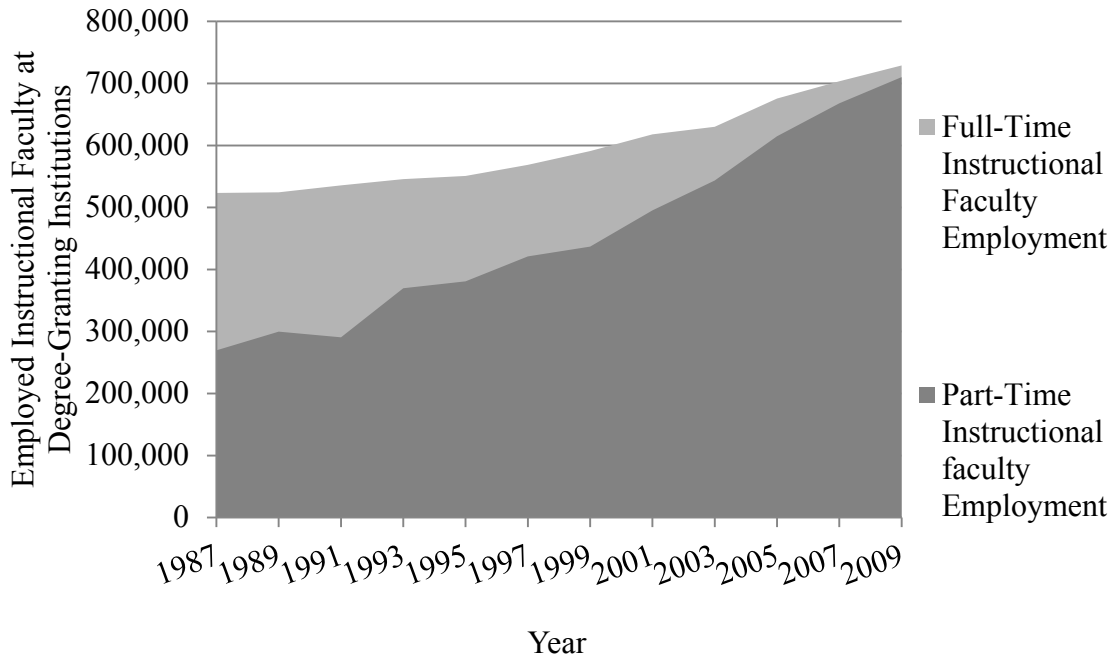
The application of neoliberal subjectivity to the academic worker is described as “academic capitalism” (Rhoades and Slaughter 1997). Administrators create the conditions for the emerging predominance of the “academic capitalist” by “creating new structures, incentives, and rewards” that favor competition, individualism, and income-generating research while “simultaneously instituting constraints and disincentives” that constrain possibilities of collaboration, community-building, and improving education (Slaughter and Leslie 1997: 1). Competitive individualism creates a “culture of narcissism” in which successful academics, believing in the meritocratic nature of the system, come to see their success in individualistic terms divorced from university power structures (Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

Instructors are thus disciplined or socialized into accepting an academic community subsumed by relations of capitalist work and consumption, thus intensifying the “subsumed class processes” involved in university work (Gibson-Graham et al.: 2001; 8). For example, academics have “multiple responsibilities” to a wide array of stakeholders impacted by our work (Cuples and Pawson 2012: 17). With the neoliberal concept of “responsibility,” however, our responsibility to administrators and their plans and visions must outweigh all others. Thus, we must justify our work to administrators through growing “audit cultures” relying on “stress-inducing surveillance” (Cuples and

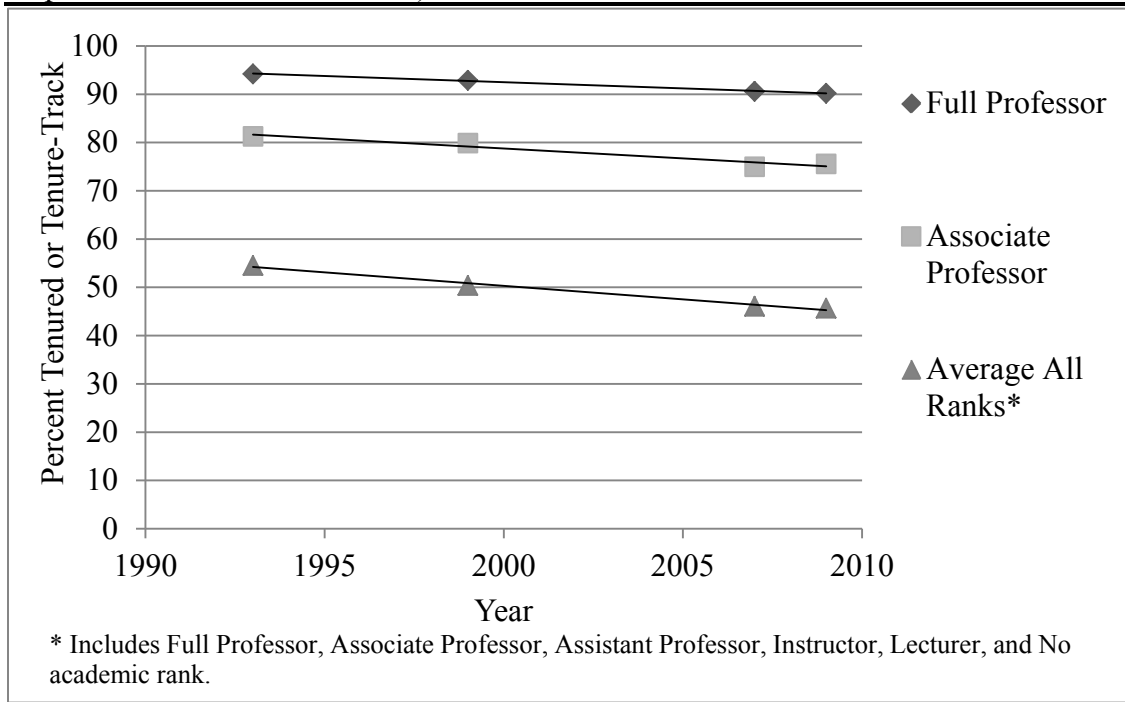
Pawson 2012: 15-16). An inability to account for our value as workers in ways that align with administrators' views leads to negative sanctions.

In the current study, focus groups are used to investigate how graduate employees understand and navigate their work. The concepts of the neoliberal university and academic capitalism serve to orient my understanding of current structural, cultural, and psychological elements of university teaching work. Specifically, I investigate if and how the presence of a GEU and increased GEU activity influence participants' ability to understand the context of their work within neoliberal structures and how they understand their personal and collective agency within these structures. Underlying these questions is an investigation into how thoroughly participants have internalized neoliberal subjectivity, and if this is affected by the presence of a GEU and increased GEU activity.

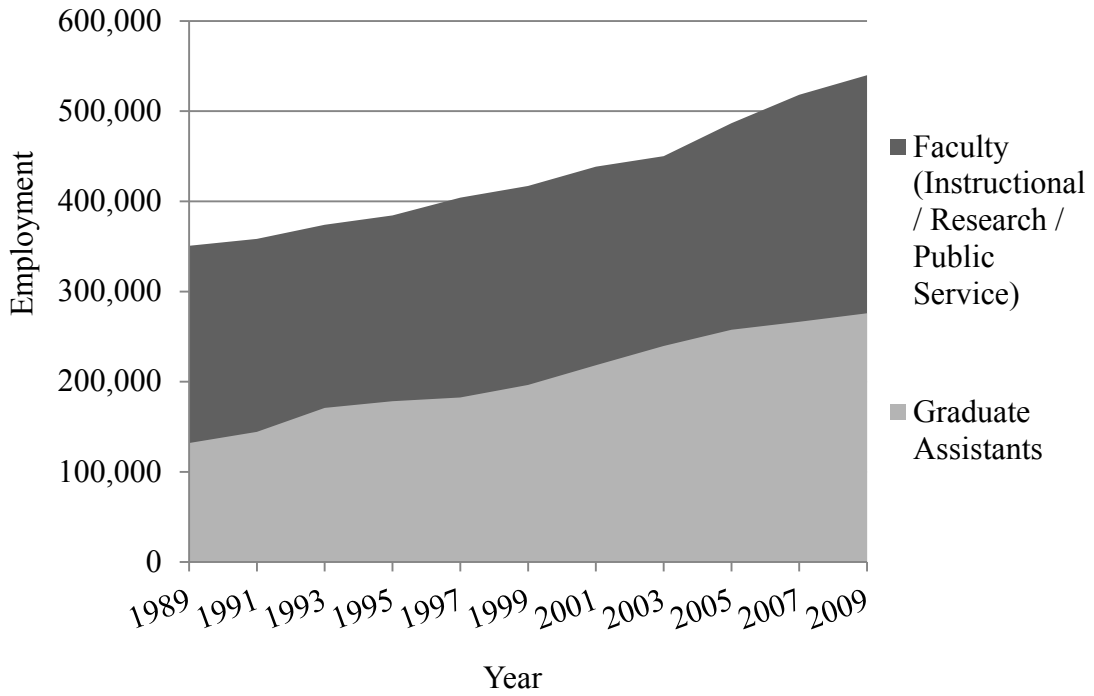
**Figure 1.1:** Employment of full-time and part-time instructional faculty at degree-granting institutions from 1987 to 2009. Source (U.S. Department of Education 2010a)



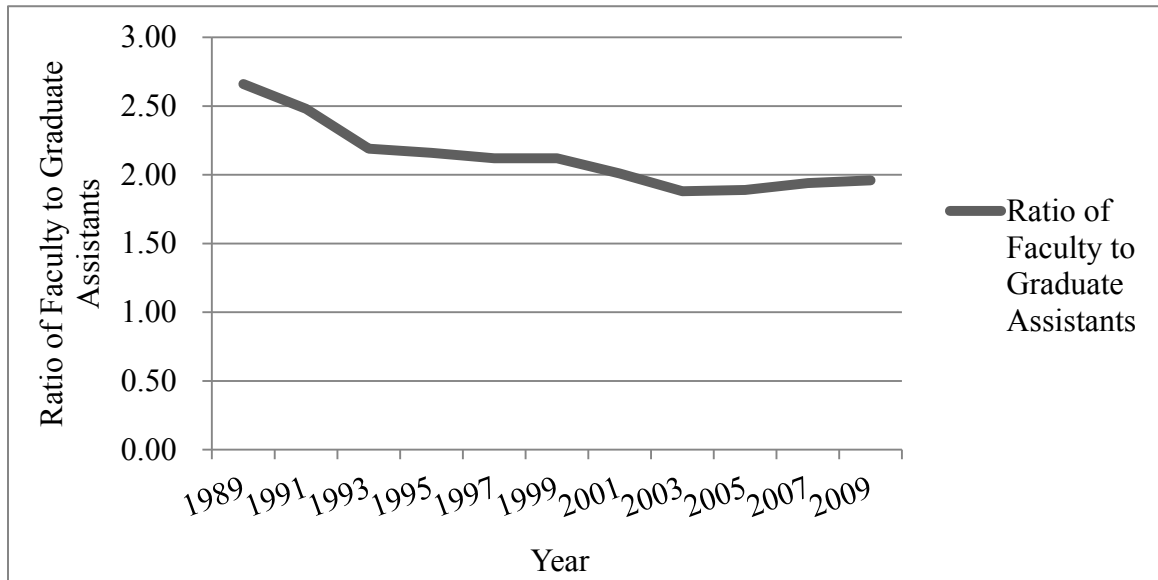
**Figure 1.2:** Percentage of full-time instructional staff with tenure for doctoral institutions with a tenure system by academic rank from 1993 through 2009. Source (U.S. Department of Education 2010c)



**Figure 1.3:** Employment of Faculty and Graduate Assistants at degree-granting institutions from 1989 to 2009. Source (U.S. Department of Education 2010b)



**Figure 1.4:** Ratio of Faculty Employment to Graduate Assistant Employment from 1989 to 2009. Source (U.S. Department of Education 2010b)



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## CHAPTER TWO: THEORIES AND CONTEXTS: HEGEMONY AND LIBERATION

The concepts of the neoliberal university and academic capitalism serve as a background for understanding university teaching work. Gramsci's concepts of civil society, hegemony and counterhegemony inform my understanding of how neoliberal ideologies, and ideologies which challenge neoliberalism, are formed, disseminated, and maintained. In addition, concepts within new social movement theory (NSMT), particularly Habermas' (1981) theory of "new" social movements, Snow et al.'s (1986) processes of frame alignment, McAdam's (1982) writings on political opportunities for mobilization, and the concept of cognitive liberation (McAdam 1982; Futrell 2003; Nepstad 1997), are used to explore various processes of graduate employee union (GEU) organizing.

### *Civil society and hegemony*

For Gramsci, "civil society" includes social organizations that are neither expressly profit-generating nor in control of state power (Forgacs 2000; Gramsci 2003). Ideologies are created, reproduced, and disseminated within these organizations. Hegemonic ideas are those that strengthen the social control of elites, justifying their power through a belief that elites' rule in the best interests of the collective and therefore in the interest of all parties. Thus, hegemonic ideas serve to undermine democratic impulses and defend questionable social practices as either necessary or just (Forgacs 2000; Gramsci 2003).

Autonomous ideas arise from shared social experiences and collective processes. When these autonomous ideas are informed by the experiences of oppressed, dominated, or exploited groups, they likely take counterhegemonic forms (Forgacs 2000; Gramsci 2003). An example would be the emergence of feminist philosophies from all-woman consciousness-raising groups. Counterhegemonic ideas undermine elites' control by casting elite power as serving their own interests, or the interests of other powerful players, at the expense of the collective or specific groups (Forgacs 2000; Gramsci 2003).

The neoliberal university is an organ of civil society through which academic workers are organically connected to the capitalist class and imbued with capitalist hegemonic ideas and practices. The ability of elites to control the work environment through management and policy creates work experiences which reinforce the underlying logic of capitalist restructuring of the university. The internalization of capitalist hegemony within the university can be understood as the degree that corporate interests in the universities and managerial actors are seen to represent the common institutional interest, and the degree to which social actors accept the assumptions and conditions of neoliberal policies within the university. Operating within this competition-driven model, academic capitalists embrace and internalize, either enthusiastically or cynically, the underlying logic of neoliberalism. When favorably situated, acting as an academic capitalist by facilitating elites' political projects within the university is rewarded through covert and overt incentive structures. For example, pushing one's department to out-compete others in the "multiversity" system is one maneuver to prove one's abilities to navigate the "neoliberal university's" power structure.

According to Gumpert, the academic division of labor is “based on division of commitment” (1988: 55). Those academics who successfully move into higher administrative realms, then, must prove their commitment to the institution as understood by those higher in the hierarchy. In these “contradictory locations,”<sup>8</sup> faculty members must demonstrate their commitments to both their colleagues in their fields and the administrative imperatives of the organization. Department and college leaders who excel in such an environment are likely to “search for understandings that reflect their world views” by favoring those faculty members, through hiring, tenure and promotion, whose work activity is congruent with the organizational needs to replicate itself as a capitalist enterprise, even if this endangers the educational imperatives of academic freedom of thought and expression (Gumpert 1988: 42).

Unions are also organs of civil society. Depending on their internal power structure, they are capable of forming and upholding either hegemonic or counterhegemonic views. Historically, many unions have supported hegemonic ideas, particularly in relation to the post-WWII “labor compact” between labor leaders and capital. During this time, radicals were systematically purged from the labor movement; power within unions shifted from members to “professional” union staff and elected officials, undermining internal union democracy; and unions increasingly cooperated with management to “discipline and regulate the workforce,” keeping “troublemakers” in line and thus stabilizing capitalist social relations and profit-generation (Parker and Gruelle 1999: 23, 24; Moody 2007: 184; Clawson 2003: 32-33, 42; Aronowitz 2005). This conservative pole of the labor movement has been termed “business unionism” (Aronowitz 2005: 286).

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of “contradictory class locations,” see Wright 1997.

In contrast, a radical pole has existed within the movement, termed “social movement unionism” (Fantasia and Stepan Norris 2007; Moody 2007; Aronowitz 2005: 288; Engeman 2010; 3-4; Carty 2006: 240) Although marginalized, social movement unionism in the United States has been traced back to the Knights of Labor in 1886 (Fantasia and Stepan-Norris2007: 236). The basic formula for social movement unionism is laid out as “union + community + issue campaign” (Moody 2007: 236). Social movement unionism recognizes many forms of organizing in the support of workers and “alliances in an overall struggle for justice” (Carty 2006: 242). Social movement unionism is also dedicated to internal union democracy, reflecting the prefigurative logic of new social movements (Aronowitz 2005: 289; Fantasia and Stepan-Norris 2007: 563). The post-1980 labor movement decline has given social movement unionism increased relevance, pushing unions to use new strategies, with some concluding that “the only way to win is to act more like a movement” (Clawson 2007: 28; Moody 2007; Engeman 2010: 3).

#### *New social movements and graduate employee unions*

In 1981, Habermas published “New Social Movements,” which introduced the idea that social movements within postindustrial society have taken on a new form, focusing not on material distribution of resources but rather on “postmaterialist concerns” of cultural reproduction, including respect and defending public goods. In relation to collective respect, this activism often takes the form of working to influence collective representations, such as media portrayals, of their particular identity-based community (Meyer and Whittier 1994: 277; Durkheim 2009). For example, the Gay and Lesbian

Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) uses “entertainment and social media to bring culture-changing stories of LGBT people into millions of homes and workplaces every day” and speaks out against derogatory portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in the media (GLAAD 2012). Previous to the new social movement (NSM) paradigm, social movements were thought of as “purposive and collective attempt[s] of a number of people to change individuals or societal *institutions* and *structures*” but not necessarily cultures (Zald and Ash 1966: 329 emphasis added).

According to Habermas, NSMs exist “at the seam between system and life-world,” or between the lived experiences and values of individuals and communities and “an economic and administrative system” which rules by “power and money” (Habermas 1981: 36). Such movements “defend popular interests” and create autonomous and democratic spaces for marginalized communities (Buechler 1995: 433). New social movements were seen as operating through communities and networks of movement supporters, as opposed to old social movements which spawned membership organizations that were often criticized for their tendency to become institutionalized into the power structure. This understanding of new social movements would indicate that these movement communities and networks are capable of formulating autonomous and counterhegemonic ideologies.

New social movement theory (NSMT) was one way in which social theorists sought to distinguish their own subject of interest from the “old” labor and working class movements that were central to the rise of the New Left of the 1960s. In a dialectical relationship with the rise and erosion of the New Left, and particularly with the upsurge of student protests in the United States and European nations in 1968, “new” identity-

based (including feminism, LGBTQ, civil rights) and belief- or value-based (environmentalism, human rights, anti-war/peace) movements came to the foreground of sociological research and thinking. Today, 44 years past the 1968 revolts, there is some reason to question the conceptual stability of the “old / new” dichotomy (Buechler 1995: 447).

Buechler recognizes many of the supposedly “new” features of the NSMs reflected a global crest in movement activity rather than a distinct break with previous movement traditions and practices (1995: 445, 448). Further, the line between fighting for cultural and structural change cannot be assumed to be impermeable. For example, the LGBT movement’s fight for marriage equality rights is framed in both non-material and material concerns, highlighting both a desire for increased acceptance and respect for lesbian and gay relationships and access to the material legal benefits associated with marriage. The “newness” of NSMT may today be better understood in a new way in which scholars understand social movements, rather than a newness of the movements themselves.

Social movement theories within the NSMT paradigm have sensitized social movement researchers to particular aspects of the internal and external dynamics of social movements, including social-psychological views of movement cultures, the internal social networks of movement communities and organizations, and the ways that movements are embedded within larger, power-imbued “structural backdrops” (Buechler 1995: 443). When synthesized, these cultural, social network, and external-structural perspectives can provide a powerful and holistic tool for analyzing social movements.

Here, this unified, holistic view is described as “cognitive liberation” (McAdam 1982: 40, 51; Futrell 2003: 359; Bell 2010: 52).

Increased “political opportunities” for oppressed, dominated, and exploited people arise when “broad social processes” shift objective structural power in ways that undermine elites’ ability to suppress collective challenges to their rule (McAdam 1982: 37, 41-42). An opening of political opportunity, however, creates only the potential for mobilization (McAdam 1982: 37; Kriesi 2007). In order to convert this potential into a reality of social change, oppressed people must have a transformation of their worldviews, that is, they must become cognitively liberated (McAdam 1982: 50; Bell 2010; Nepstad 1997).

An opening of political opportunity will be reflected in oppressed individuals’ daily experiences, and thus their intuitive understanding (Peckham 2003: 424; Glass 2001: 17-18; McAdam 1982: 48-49). However, this intuitive understanding does not directly lead to a cognitive recognition of their situation if they either lack the language to support such an understanding or if recognizing their political opportunity would be in conflict with their beliefs (Lloyd 1972: 10-11). The former case, closely related to the theory of linguistic relativity, was expressed by Žižek (2002): “We feel free because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom.” This latter occurrence is likely to arise when oppressed peoples have accepted and internalized hegemonic ideologies which sustain the structures and practices of their own domination, oppression, or exploitation (Lloyd 1972; Bell 2010: 53). In these contexts, daily life is experienced as a series of “limit situations,” to use Freire’s terminology, in which incongruences between individuals’ experiences and their understanding of those experiences create frustrations,

confusion and apathy (Petruzzi 1998: 310; Ronald and Roskelly 2001: 615; Lloyd 1972: 10; Bell 2010: 51; Leonardo 2004: 15). In these contexts, individuals are likely to create justifications for unjust social practices, aligning their intuitive understanding to their cognitive beliefs, or respond to these dynamics with silence, confusion and inaction (Lloyd 1972: 10; Petruzzi 1998: 310).

Social movements are unlikely to arise without community organization among possible activists that can sustain a sense of collectivity and shared world-views and goals that resonate with people's experiences and are suitable to facilitate collective challenges to elites' power and practices (Snow 2007; Kriesi 2007: 72). To create collective action, limit situations must be met with "limit acts," in Freire's terms, or interactions that allow individuals to detach from their situation sufficiently to imagine possible alternatives and bring their cognitive beliefs in-line with their objective experiences and intuitive understanding (Glass 2001: 16, 18; Ronald and Roskelly 2001: 620; Bell 2010: 52). Within these limit acts, potential movement participants build shared world-views and goals, or "frames" which serve as collective "schemata of interpretation" and inform social action (Snow et al. 1986: 464, 469; McAdam 1982; Futrell 2003). The process of building these frames is labeled "frame amplification," and this has been described as central to facilitating the process of cognitive liberation (Snow et al. 1986: 469; Nepstad 1997: 471).

One aspect of frame amplification is "belief amplification," a process which occurs in several stages (Snow et al. 1986: 469-470; Nepstad 2007; 472). First, possible activists must identify a problem that they see as both serious and unjust (Snow et al. 1986: 469; Bell 2010: 52). Next, they must believe that these problems can be attributed



to others, against whom they can mobilize (Snow et al. 1986: 469; Futrell 2003: 361). And finally, they must come to believe that collective action is both a necessary and effective means of addressing their problem (Snow et al. 1986: 469; Bell 2010: 52-53; Nepstad 2007: 472).

Thus, through these processes of belief amplification, individuals overcome fatalism, recognize their collective agency, and become cognitively liberated (Nepstad 2007; Bell 2010; Futrell 2003). As frame amplification is a social act, having ties to other movement participants is a necessary component of these processes. However, these ties must generate “social capital” or bonds of solidarity, trust, support, and norms of reciprocity if potential activists are to engage in frame-aligning processes (Bourdieu 1986: 48; Bell 2010: 45). Under the conditions of becoming cognitively liberated, this social capital can be transformed into increased social and economic power for the community (Bourdieu 1986).

The dynamics of social movement unionism are particularly well-suited to produce “a convergence of theories that explain both ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements” (Carty 2006: 239; Fantasia and Stepan-Norris 2007: 561). In creating democratic and autonomous spaces and seeking allies with other workers, oppressed peoples, unions and social movement organizations, social movement-oriented unions are well-posed for the formation and sustaining of autonomous and counterhegemonic discourses. In the case of graduate employees, whose labor power produces knowledge, these counterhegemonic discourses can become powerful tools for undermining elite domination. To the extent that academic workers create autonomous spaces, such as unions, these intellectuals increase the likelihood of producing autonomous intellectual activity and world-views

arising out of workers' life-worlds, while also resisting hegemonic ideologies of university administrations.

The current literature on GEUs indicates that these organizations display many features of social movement unionism and serve as linkages between the traditional labor movement and the “new” social movements in which university students often play several roles (Carty 2006; Dawson 2007; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003; Rhoades and Rhoads 2005; Dewberry 2005; Etin 2005). For example, the NYU GEU created “committees...to embrace activism on issues as varied as academic freedom, environmentalism, [and] peace” (Dawson 2007: 98). The NYU organizing slogan, “Another University is Possible,” highlights the organizational affinity for the world social forum movement, a broad assembly of anti-neoliberal, justice-oriented groups who proclaim that “Another World is Possible” (Dawson 2007; Forum Social Mundial 2012). A review of GEU websites also shows that concern for social justice, particularly affirmative action (Rhoades and Rhoads 2003: 177). In framing their struggle as one against “corporatization,” GEUs are not only working to protect their members, but education more broadly (Rhoades and Rhoads 2005). The protection of the public good, as well as the possibility that such defensive maneuvering can sow the seeds for proactive struggle, has been described in heroic terms by Bourdieu:

If one can retain some hope, it is that in state institutions there still exist forces which, under the appearance of simply defending a vanishing order...will in fact...have to work to invent and construct a social order which is not governed solely by the pursuit of selfish interests and individual profit. (Dawson 2007: 91)

The defense of public goods, then, is seen as embodying a resistance from the universality of capitalist logic, while holding ground within the life-world from which a counterattack can be mounted. These demands are in line with NSM theories' emphasis

on demands concerning “collective consumption provided by the state” (Buechler 1995: 433). Protecting collective consumption, such as quality public education is central to NSM theorists’ focus on “cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization,” often framed in relation to growing class sizes and trainings for graduate employee teachers (Buechler 1995: 446; Rhoads and Rhoades 2005: 247, 252). When interviewed, graduate employee unionists have said that the devaluation of their work as teachers indicates a lack of concern for undergraduate education on the part of administrators (Rhoades and Rhoads 2003). Administrations’ profit-maximizing strategies have thus been described as “assembly line undergraduate education” which undermines both educational quality for students and working conditions for teachers (Rhoades and Rhoads 2003: 176). This issue of the pride in one’s work ties together materialist grievances of pay and benefits with postmaterialist concerns of dignity and respect. To date, no studies have analyzed the internal democratic processes of GEUs. However, their willingness to tie their workplace struggles to fights against neoliberal restructuring, GEUs seem uniquely suited to being analyzed through a NSM lens.

The literature on determinants of GEU organizing points to several reasons why graduate employees unionize (Dixon et al. 2008; Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003). Dixon et al. have noted that the upsurge in graduate employee unionizing is “primarily a reaction to changing labor conditions within the university” (2008: 380). This can be understood in two, interrelated ways, as both an opening of political opportunity for GEU organizing and as a proletarianization of graduate employee labor.

First, “changing labor conditions” may create political opportunities. A quantitative study on determinants of organizing found that those universities with an “increased reliance on non-tenure track instructional faculty” were significantly more likely to experience graduate employee unionizing drives (Dixon et al. 2008: 392). Overall, there has been a decrease in tenure track positions of 10% since the late 1990s and an increase in TA positions of 40% (Dixon et al. 2008: 377). This increase has been attributed to institutional needs for instructors (Dawson 2007). These wide economic, structural, and cultural changes within higher education can be seen as “historically specific social formations” which serve as the “structural backdrop” of increasing political opportunity for graduate employee unionizing (Buechler 1995: 443).

Second, deteriorating work conditions may increase grievances and act as a catalyst for collective action. According to Rhoads and Rhoades, increasingly rigid administrative hierarchies and managerial control cause increased grievances (2005: 270). Although concerned with a broad justice agenda and quality education, addressing these concerns alone would likely result in a different type of social movement organization than a union. GEUs’ “main concerns are wages, benefits...protections...[and] health care insurance” (Rhoades and Rhoads 2003: 176). These concerns mirror those changes described as the de-professionalization and proletarianization of university teaching-work more broadly (Aronowitz 1998; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009; Etin 2005; Aronowitz and Difazzio 2010).

Studies of GEU framing have indicated that these organizations frame their grievances both in terms of the personal employment difficulties faced by graduate employees and broader social justice concerns, using a discourse of resistance to

corporate incursion into the academy, which impacts working conditions, and the quality of undergraduate education (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003; Freeman 2000; Wickens 2008; Dawson 2007). Rhoads and Rhoades found that union organizers see unionization as “both a symbol of and challenge to the corporatization of the American research university” displaying both materialist and post-materialist concerns (2005: 246). Dewberry notes that while “economic factors play a subtle role” in organizing, graduate assistants may be more motivated by feelings of disrespect, a perception of a “negative attitude of management toward them” (2005: 631).

Through frame amplification, graduate employee unionists have defined themselves and their organizations as preserving the academic life-world from the “corporate-driven economic logic” of corporate and administrative influences (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005.: 252). GEU frames have defined administrators as both personal adversaries and threats to public education, or as an “external enemy” attempting “a hostile takeover” of educational institutions and threatening “the basic values of the university” while faculty members have been framed as potential allies (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005: 252; Wickens 2008).

By viewing structural and cultural changes within higher education in this way, we may describe them in Habermasian terms as the colonization of the life-world of higher education (Habermas 1981). GEUs and individual activists have been highly consistent on this point, defining their organizing as a resistance to “a corporate-driven economic logic in the contemporary university” which has been “charted by university administrators” (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005: 252, 269). From a Habermasian perspective, GEUs have the potential to both defend the life-world of academia from systemic

colonization by systems of bureaucracy and capitalism while also constructing new collective spaces and bonds of solidarity (social capital) within the universities (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005). To the extent that GEUs resist these changes by defying both capitalist logic and the administrative-centric power structure, we can think of these movements as “resistance movements” against such colonization, placing them unambiguously within the realm of NSMT (Habermas 1981; Buechler 1995). This formulation places GEUs unambiguously within the realm of NSMT, with a focus on “resistance to a systemic logic of commodification and bureaucratization” (Buechler 1995: 433).

There is little research on the impact GEUs have in working conditions or in the structural and cultural systems of the universities where they organize, with Ehrenberg et al.’s (2002) study being the first to address GEU impacts on graduate employee wages. There are also no systematic data on how these organizations impact work stability or graduate employee health benefits. Preliminary data do suggest, though, that graduate employee unionization can impact workload, some aspects of pay and the relationships between graduate employees and faculty (Ehrenberg et al. 2002; Wickens 2008; Lee et al. 2004; Julius and Gumport 2002; Hewitt 2000).

According to a study by Ehrenberg et al. (2002), graduate employee unionization does not positively impact graduate students’ stipends. However, their research indicates that unionization may decrease fees which graduate students pay to the university, and also may increase pay for summer work. There are methodological reasons to question their findings, however. Ehrenberg et al. (2002) compared graduate employee stipend amount at unionized and non-unionized universities, having collected economic data

from 27 universities, 16 with no collective bargaining agreement and 11 with collective bargaining agreements. The data exchange which provided this information is confidential, with no descriptive statistics or other information given about these institutions. There is no indication that these universities were randomly selected or representative of US universities as a whole. As such, the generalizability of their findings is questionable. Further, the researchers looked only at stipend amounts and not other aspects of pay including the stability of funding regimes which can undermine competition and increase the stability of employment.

Other studies have addressed the impact that GEUs have on the relationships of graduate assistants and faculty members. According to Wickens, administrators (more so than faculty) express that endangering student-faculty relationships is their “greatest concern” in relation to GEU organizing (2008: 13). Wickens reviews three studies on the impact of graduate employee unionization on the student-faculty relationship, Lee et al. 2004, Julius and Gumpert 2002, and Hewitt 2000. These investigators conducted interviews with faculty members, graduate employees and union negotiators, consistently finding that organizing among graduate employees improves the student-faculty relationship (Wickens 2008). These studies attribute this positive outcome to decreases in graduate employee teachers’ workload which gives them more time to devote to studies and therefore improving academic performance as well as clarifying “roles, responsibilities, expectations, and employment policies” (Wickens 2008: 14). The implication of reduced workload is key to understanding how organizing can undermine the proletarianization of graduate employment.

## CHAPTER THREE: AIMS, DATA, AND METHODS

### *Aims of study and research questions*

The current study is both descriptive and exploratory. As descriptive research, this study aims to increase our understanding of the concepts of the “neoliberal university” and “social movement unionism” as applied to graduate employees’ work and organizing unions. Further, this study aims to increase our understanding of how graduate teaching employees, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, experience their work and how they conceptualize their agency within the university. As an exploratory study, this investigation seeks to examine the impacts of graduate employee union (GEU) organizing on graduate employees’ work experiences, and their subjective views of their work and their agency to create change within their university.

### *Quantitative descriptive questions*

1. Do employment trends support the theories of the “neoliberal university”?
2. Is there a significant correlation indicated in graduate employee union constitutions and/or bylaws between concerns of internal democratic functioning and social justice orientation?

### *Qualitative descriptive question*

1. How do graduate teaching assistants describe their work?

### *Qualitative exploratory questions*

1. What impacts, if any, do having a graduate employee union and being actively involved in this organization make on graduate employees’ experiences of and understanding of their work?
2. What impacts, if any, do having a graduate employee union and being actively involved in this organization make on graduate employees’ understandings of their personal agency within their universities?



*Preliminary quantitative data collection and analysis*

I collected data tables from the National Center of Education Statistics and the Oklahoma State University Special Study on Faculty Salary at the Top 20 US public research universities (Oklahoma State University 2012) to allow me to quantitatively investigate some of the trends noted in the literature concerning education at doctoral public research universities. These data were used to quantify and better understand some of the employment trends discussed in the literature on academic work, as discussed in Chapter 1 and displayed in Figures 1.1 through 1.4, (pp. 13-14).

I also analyzed GEU locals' constitutions and/or bylaws using an index for policy-level democratic function, which I developed loosely following Levi et al.'s (2009) criteria. Of the 27 currently recognized GEU locals in the United States, I was able to find these documents for 18 GEUs on union local websites. Nine others had to be requested from the union locals themselves. Eight unions either indicated that they did not have a constitution or chose not to make these documents available. I collected documentation on 21 union locals out of 27 locals affiliated with the Coalition of GEUs in the United States, or 77.78% of such locals in the United States.

In addition to the index for policy-level democratic functioning, I also developed an index for assessing the stated social justice orientation of the local. Taken together, scores on the policy-level democracy index and the social justice orientation index were used to assign an overall social movement unionism score to each of the 21 locals. A description of this finding is in Chapter 3, and is displayed in Figure 3.1 (p. 38). These scores were primarily used to choose a research site, but also provide validity to the application of the concept of social movement unionism to GEUs.

### *Qualitative data collection and analysis*

In addressing my research questions, I used focus groups with graduate teaching assistants, including non-unionized graduate employees, inactive GEU members and GEU stewards. These directed group conversations were thought to be more valuable than individual interviews or surveys in investigating the “social facts” associated with employment and organizing. In this I follow Durkheim’s suggestion that group conceptions are more valuable than individual’s thoughts in isolation when investigating “collective ways of being” (Durkheim 2009: 146). As such, the focus group method was better suited to my research topic than other commonly used data collection techniques, such as individual interviews or surveys.

To compare the impact of a graduate employee union on how graduate employees experience their work and express their social views, I chose two research sites, one with a GEU and one without a GEU. In choosing my unionized research site, I hoped to recruit participants from a university with a GEU that was both internally democratic and social justice oriented, as I believed that this overall organizing model reflects best the current trends in GEUs as NSMs.<sup>9</sup> After analyzing organizational constitutions and/or bylaws, I ranked these organizations according to policy-level indications of social movement unionism. I chose the union local with the third highest score as my research site, because those locals with the top two scores were not within a reasonable driving distance. These indices can be found in Appendix A (p. 86).

I chose my non-unionized research site based on geographic proximity to the researcher and based on similarities between the two sites. Both of my research sites are

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<sup>9</sup> Because I chose a site with a union ranking high on the social movement unionism index, further research will be needed to better understand the impact of unions and activity in those unions which scored substantially lower on this index.

large (Carnegie classification L4), with a mean student population of 26,600 and a difference of less than 800 students. Both of these sites are also publically-controlled universities with very high research activities (Carnegie classification RU/VH). Both of these sites are doctorate-granting institutions. This subset of institutions accounts for 6.1% of institutions of higher learning in the United States (297 institutions) in which are enrolled 22% of the current US student population (2,975,497 students), when including for-profit institutions. While the current discussion cannot be readily applied to all institutional types, working and studying in a doctoral institution is necessary for most faculty members. This, along with institutional isomorphism operating under different mechanisms, indicates that the systemic and cultural dynamics operating at public research universities have ramifications for all institutional types.

I targeted my recruitment of non-unionized participants and inactive union members to four disciplines: English, Spanish, communications, and history. Narrowing my recruitment in this way was necessary to make the recruitment process manageable. These specific disciplines were chosen because they were thought to be representative of the humanities and social sciences as a whole. Following Fairweather's (2005) insight that salaries can be seen as an indication of prestige in an organization, I chose disciplines which were found to not be significantly different in this way from humanities and social sciences in general. Using data from the Oklahoma State University Special Study on Faculty Salary at the Top 20 US public research universities, I compared mean salaries at various employment ranks between my targeted disciplines and those within the liberal arts and humanities disciplines as a whole. Salaries in my targeted disciplines were found to be lower at all levels when compared to all humanities and social science fields.

However, these differences were small, and statistically insignificant. An ANOVA analysis indicates that there is no significant difference between these groups, with  $p=0.87$ , insignificant at the ( $\alpha=0.05$ ) threshold. This finding indicates that my target disciplines are comparable to those in social sciences and humanities as a whole and are suitable for generalizations to this broader group of disciplines. These groups are compared in Table 3.1 and Figure 3.1 (p. 38).

I focused my recruitment within the humanities and social sciences for two main reasons. First, these fields have been described as devalued within the neoliberal university in relation to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and professional fields (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; Bennett 1984; Curtis 2001). Second, graduate employees in the humanities and social sciences have been found to be the most supportive of, and active within, GEU organizing, in general (Dixon et al. 2008; Ehrenberg et al. 2002). Narrowing my recruitment to the humanities and social sciences allowed me to attribute differences among groups more clearly to the presence of a GEU and increased activity with a GEU. While a broader approach may have increased the generalizability of my findings to all graduate teaching assistants, differences in relation to institutional value and tendencies to support GEUs among different types of disciplines may have biased my findings.

I began my recruitment effort by creating a sampling frame of all teaching assistants in each of the above mentioned fields at both research sites. Using a random number generator, I chose individuals from this sampling frame to request their participation directly. The response rate to this method was unsatisfactory, with only two responses out of 50 requests. I then contacted departmental directors of graduate study

and graduate student organizations within each department of interest. I also visited each research site and placed solicitation letters in teaching assistant mailboxes for each of the departments of interest, and visited graduate employee offices to request participation. This method may have introduced some self-selection bias into the study, but was necessary to access sufficient numbers of participants. My response rate was also increased by an incentive of entering a drawing for one of two chances to win \$100.00. My recruitment efforts fell short of my target of ten participants at each research site, with nine project recruits at my non-union site and seven at my unionized site.

During each focus group, I asked participants to write down specific demographic characteristics describing their self-identities and their experiences in graduate programs. In relation to demographic questions, I asked participants to indicate their self-identifications of gender and race. In relation to graduate program experiences, I asked participants to indicate if they had teaching experience as a “primary instructor,” in which they taught their own class, or if they worked as a teaching assistant directly under a faculty member grading or leading a discussion section of a large lecture course. I also asked for their departments and their number of years in their graduate programs. These descriptive statistics, both overall and broken down by analytic group (non-union, inactive union members, and active union members) are presented in Table 3.3 (p. 40). Due to small numbers of participants with particular characteristics, further analyses based on several of these characteristics are difficult to ascertain. For example, Latinos were more prevalent in my active union group than in any other group and communications students made up a much larger percentage of non-unionized participants than unionized participants.

I created a focus group facilitation guide following best practices as indicated in the manual *The Power of Focus Groups* (Billson 2002). My focus group facilitation guide can be found in Appendix B (p. 87). Focus group questions were designed to address both specifics of daily work life and participants' experiences in higher education as well as more broad opinions of social policy and higher education. The moderator's guide directed the conversation to specific topics dealing with respondents' work experiences and relations to other university employees.

I conducted two focus groups at each research site. These focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 hours each, during which time I asked participants to discuss topics associated with their work-life as graduate employees, social views, and ability to make change on campus. These focus groups were both video and audio recorded. From these recordings, I created transcripts for each group. Demographic information for each focus group are presented in Table 3.2 (p. 39)

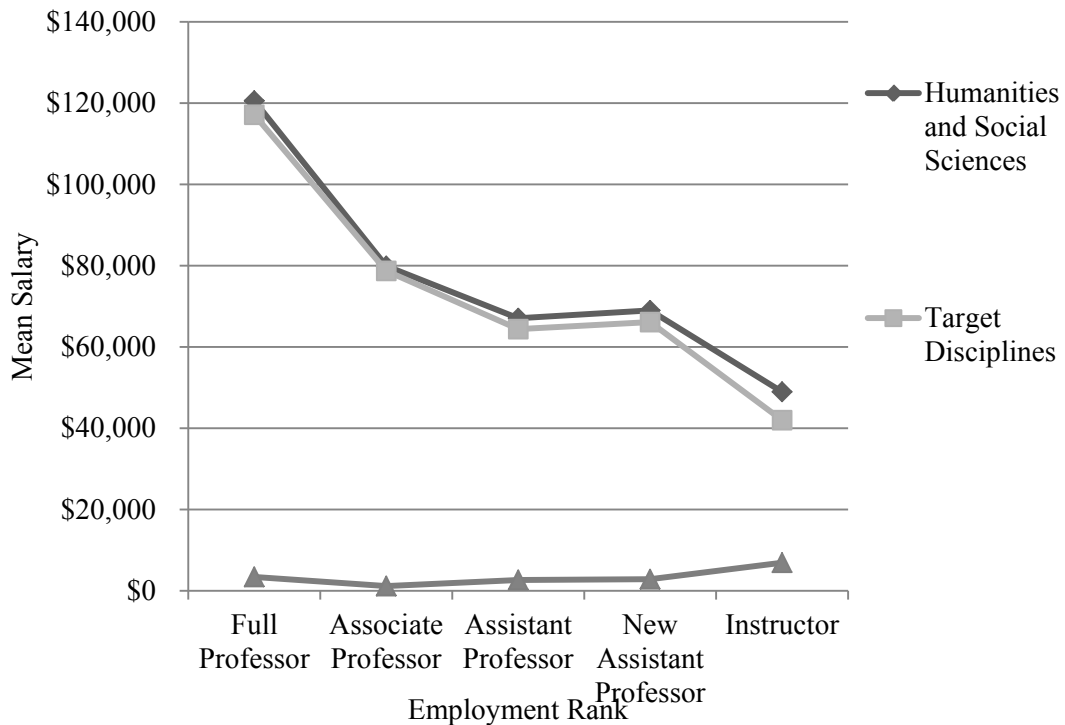
I used video and audio recordings to capture each focus group. I transcribed each focus group recording into NVivo 9 Qualitative Analysis Software. I then coded participants' responses first using the focus group questions and themes. I then coded each comment to a node associated with the research participant who made the comment. I then ran a compound coding query within NVivo for each focus group theme, specific to three distinct groups: participants who are not unionized, participants who are unionized but not active in their union, and active unionized participants. Additional targeted coding focused on specific themes that were common across focus group prompts.

From focus group transcripts, I twice summarized and abstracted participants' comments in relation to each question and topic I proposed during the focus groups. Throughout the analysis process, some themes emerged that both spanned several focus group prompts and were relevant in regard to the literature. I ran NVivo queries on these and summarized these findings, adding them to the narrative of the following chapter.

**Table 3.1:** Mean Salaries and Mean Differences between Humanities and Social Sciences and Targeted Disciplines at “Top 20” Research Universities. (N=20) Source (Oklahoma State University 2012)

<i>Employment rank</i>	Humanities and Social Sciences <sup>10</sup>	Targeted Disciplines <sup>11</sup>	Difference (Percent difference <sup>12</sup> )
Average	\$91,663	\$84,719	\$6,994 (8.23%)
Full Professor	\$120,589	\$117,163	\$3,426 (2.92%)
Associate Professor	\$79,933	\$78,751	\$1,182 (1.50%)
Assistant Professor	\$67,074	\$64,408	\$2,666 (4.14%)
New Assistant Professor	\$69,008	\$66,143	\$2,865 (4.33%)
Instructor	\$48,956	\$42,020	\$6,936 (16.51%)

**Figure 3.1:** Mean Salaries and Mean Differences between Humanities and Social Sciences and Targeted Disciplines at “Top 20” Research Institutions. (N=20) Source (Oklahoma State University 2012)



<sup>10</sup> Area, ethnic, cultural and gender studies; foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics; communication, journalism, and related programs; family and consumer sciences/human sciences; English language and literature/letters; philosophy and religious studies; psychology; social sciences; visual and performing arts; history

<sup>11</sup> Communications, Spanish, English, history

<sup>12</sup> The listed percent difference is the difference as a percent of the Targeted Disciplines.



**Table 3.2:** Descriptive Statistics of Participants (N=16) and Focus Groups (N=4)

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	Non-Union Site		Union Site	
	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
N	4	5	2	5
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	2 (50.00%)	5 (100.00%)	1 (50.00%)	1 (20.00%)
Male	2 (50.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (50.00%)	4 (80.00%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Latino	0 (0.00%)	1 (20.00%)	1 (25.00%)	2 (40.00%)
White	4 (100.00%)	4 (80.00%)	3 (75.00%)	3 (60.00%)
<b>First Generation College Student</b>				
Yes	1 (25.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (50.00%)	1 (20.00%)
No	3 (75.00%)	5 (100.00%)	1 (50.00%)	4 (80.00%)
<b>Department</b>				
Communications	2 (50.00%)	3 (60.00%)	1 (50.00%)	X <sup>13</sup>
History	1 (25.00%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (50.00%)	X
English	1 (25.00%)	2 (40.00%)	0 (0.00%)	X
Spanish	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	X
<b>Mean years in graduate program (Range)</b>	6.00 (5-7)	3.2 (1-4)	3.00 (3-3)	3.60 (1-7)
<b>Teaching Experience</b>				
Teaching Assistant	1 (25.00%)	3 (60.00%)	1 (25.00%)	1 (33.33%)
Primary Instructor	3 (75.00%)	2 (40.00%)	3 (75.00%)	2 (66.67%)
<b>Union Membership</b>				
Non-member	4 (100.00%)	5 (100.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)
Inactive Member	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	2 (100.00%)	2 (40.00%)
Active Member	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	3 (60.00%)
<b>Mean Academic Employment Placement Score<sup>14</sup></b>	46.10	50.26	42.65	49.00

<sup>13</sup> Because both I and these participants are concerned with confidentiality, and I mention that they are union stewards, I have chosen not to give their disciplinary affiliations as this would facilitate identification.

<sup>14</sup> Job placement scores for each group were calculated from the National Research Council's *A Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States*. In these data, (National Research Council 2011) academic employment placement rates were given for each department included in this study. These placement rates were then weighted using the percentage of participants from each department in each focus group.

**Table 3.3:** Descriptive Statistics of Participants (N=16) and Analytic Groups (N=3)

<i>Demographic Characteristics</i>	N (Percent of group)			
	All Participants	Non-unionized	Unionized	
			Inactive	Active
N	16 (100.00%)	9 (56.25%)	4 (25.00%)	3 (18.75%)
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	9 (56.25%)	7 (78.00%)	1 (25.00%)	1 (33.33%)
Male	7 (43.75%)	2 (22.00%)	3 (75.00%)	2 (66.67%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>				
Latino	4 (25.00%)	1 (11.11%)	1 (25.00%)	2 (66.67%)
White	12 (75.00%)	8 (88.88%)	3 (75.00%)	1 (33.33%)
<b>First Generation College Student</b>				
Yes	3 (18.75%)	1 (11.11%)	1 (25.00%)	1 (33.33%)
No	13 (81.25%)	8 (88.88%)	3 (75.00%)	2 (66.67%)
<b>Department</b>				
Communications	6 (37.50%)	5 (55.56%)	1 (25%)	X <sup>15</sup>
History	2 (12.50%)	1 (11.11%)	1 (25%)	X
English	5 (31.25%)	3 (33.33%)	1 (25%)	X
Spanish	3 (81.25%)	0	1 (25%)	X
<b>Mean years in graduate program</b>				
	4.00	4.44	3.75	3.00
(Range)	(1-7)	(2-7)	(3-6)	(1-7)
<b>Teaching Experience</b>				
Teaching Assistant	6 (37.50%)	4 (44.44%)	1 (25.00%)	1 (33.33%)
Primary Instructor	10 (63.50%)	5 (55.56%)	3 (75.00%)	2 (66.67%)
<b>Mean Academic Employment Placement Scores<sup>16</sup></b>				
	45.76	48.41	44.56	50.70

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<sup>15</sup> Because both I and these participants are concerned with confidentiality, and I mention that they are union stewards, I have chosen not to give their disciplinary affiliations as this would facilitate identification.

<sup>16</sup> Job placement scores for each group were calculated from the National Research Council's *A Data-Based Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States*. In these data, (National Research Council 2011) academic employment placement rates were given for each department included in this study. These placement rates were then weighted using the percentage of participants from each department in each analytic category: non-union, inactive union, and active union.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS: IMAGINED CONTEXTS AND IMAGINED SELVES

My analysis of GEU organizing documents supported the conceptual validity of “social movement unionism” as applied to the GEU whose members took part in this study. Overall, scores on the social movement unionism index ranged from 3 to 17 with a mean score of 11.05 and a median score of 11, indicating relative symmetry in the distribution of these scores. Union locals’ scores for policy-level democratic functioning and scores for social justice orientation were found to be significantly moderately correlated with an  $r=0.56$  ( $\alpha=0.001$ ), for a one-tailed t test. This correlation provides support for a conceptualization of social movement unionism that includes concerns for internal democratic functioning and concerns for social justice. See Figure 4.1 (p.63).

### *Common trends*

In both the union and non-union focus groups, participants were student-focused in their descriptions of their favorite aspects of college teaching, discussing student development and interactions with students. Also, a majority of participants in each group planned to seek employment teaching in higher education. These findings may be the result of selection bias, as my recruitment letter specified that we would be discussing college teaching, and therefore may have made it more likely that those graduate teaching assistants who value teaching would respond to my solicitation.

Peer support among graduate teaching assistants was a vital resource for all groups, with participants expressing that collaboration both lightened their workload, improved confidence and improved their teaching, with fellow graduate employees being

described by one participant as her “main resource...for talking about teaching.”

Another noted that TAs “take care of each other.” Respondents reported that sharing office space facilitated this collaboration, and some expressed that they believed peer-support should be institutionalized, encouraged and supported in their departments.

Each group also shared similar concerns including a lack of training in college teaching, being overworked in relation to both their teaching and studies, and feeling that “students are on their own in regards to teaching.” All groups were concerned with the uneven pace of their work, agreeing that the variability in the number of students taught per semester was a main factor in this inconsistency; all of them were also concerned with being over-worked, often related to role conflict between research, studies and teaching. According to one respondent, "the professors, all they're really doing is like getting up and lecturing, like once or twice a week but then all the grading, and all the everything is us."

In the most consistent finding in the study, no participants felt valued by administrators in terms of their teaching work; participants shared concerns that an increasing reliance on TAs and part time instructors may increase exploitation, with some expressing that they are “cheap labor.” One participant expressed that, “it’s a little bit frustrating that if undergrads are the priority, then the people who are instructing them should be important and we are the majority of people instructing undergrads.” Non-unionized participants claimed that administrators do care about undergraduate education, but simply don’t understand graduate employees’ problems. This feeling of disrespect was commonly associated with administrators’ decisions to increase class sizes, and therefore workload, and decrease pay and health benefits.

*What difference does a union make?*

I found the presence of a union to affect primarily participants' work experiences and views of work. Specifically, unionized participants had a more positive view of their work and more positive views of faculty. Unionized participants had fewer grievances in relation to their material benefits and displayed more agency in addressing their grievances. Non-unionized participants were also more nihilistic than unionized participants in relation to collective agency and their perceived structural power. The presence of a union made a larger impact on how participants described their work-life than did participants' activity level with their union.

Some of differences may be due to other demographic factors noted in the previous chapter. For example, non-unionized participants had different demographics from unionized participants. The non-unionized group included higher percentages of females, whites, and communications students. This group also had a higher mean number of years in graduate school and were also more likely to be teaching assistants. Among unionized participants, there were higher percentages of males, Latinos, first generation college students, and a more even distribution of participants' disciplines.

When asked to describe, in general terms, their experiences as college teachers, participants at the non-union site responded with almost completely negative comments, examples, and frustrations. Those at the union site did describe frustrations, but every participant also assessed their overall experiences as positive, with union members reporting feeling "very privileged" to teach, "love" to teach, and finding the job "exciting." A constant theme among participants at the non-union site was feeling

disrespected by faculty members in relation to their teaching. Comments about professors at the non-union site were almost wholly negative; these participants consistently expressed feelings of disrespect and were frustrated by their inability to approach faculty to ask about teaching. This was mentioned throughout the focus groups with non-union workers. Non-unionized participants described their professors as disrespectful; using “alarmist rhetoric” in relation to the academic job market; and undervaluing teaching assistants’ work. Comments among non-unionized participants included having a “very tense” relationship with faculty, feeling like a “second-class citizen,” and joking that professors “don’t want to be infected” by graduate students. Non-unionized participants were also more likely to report that faculty members both valued research over teaching, and also exacerbated the role conflict they felt between their various roles in the university. For example, one participant expressed that “education is kind of put on the back burner” in relation to professors’ research agendas and another recounted advisors’ telling her that “your [research] projects come first [before teaching responsibilities].” Other non-unionized participants expressed being “pulled in two different ways” and getting “pressure...in opposite directions,” in regard to their teaching and research responsibilities. In contrast, participants at the union research site did not report that faculty disrespected their contributions to undergraduate education.

This feeling of disrespect may be partially attributable to demographic differences between the two groups. For example, a higher percentage of non-unionized participants were females, and may experience increased disrespect from professors because of gender-based discrimination. However, both male and female non-unionized participants described feeling disrespected and female unionized participants did not describe feeling

disrespected. There was a difference, however, in how male and female non-unionized participants described being disrespected by faculty. Female participants were more likely to discuss direct, personal disrespect on the part of faculty. Male participants, however, described feeling collectively undervalued and disrespected. For instance, male non-unionized participants expressed that professors did not see increasing their payment, stabilizing their work-load, or hiring in a way that would support graduate student mentoring as departmental priorities. In contrast, female unionized participants described their relationships with faculty in wholly positive terms.

Ethnic differences was not found to impact feelings of disrespect, with both white non-unionized participants and the one Latino non-unionized participant describing feeling disrespected, with the Latino non-unionized participant describing some interactions with professors as “unprofessional” and “rude.” In contrast, neither white nor Latino unionized participants noted disrespect, with one Latino inactive union member describing the professor he works under as “a father figure” and described their working relationship as “amazing.”

Feeling disrespected may also be partially attributable to work roles. It is likely that teaching assistants may feel more dominated, and therefore disrespected, than those participants who are primary instructors. However, I did not find a difference in feelings of respect between TAs and primary instructors. Differences in disciplines also did not make a difference in feelings of disrespect.

Non-union workers were also more likely to describe frustrations with low pay and feeling impoverished than were unionized workers. Non-union graduate employees take on outside employment to supplement their low pay; this is done without their

university's knowledge because such "moonlighting" work is prohibited. These participants lamented that such "second jobs" often slowed progress in their programs. Participants at the non-union site also counted not being paid for required trainings, the instability of summer employment and not being paid on time as major frustrations. One participant expressed that she feared the "risk that we are going to, you know, be on the street for the summer" describing that "minimal...or, a lot of financial hardship...goes along with the job." In terms of uncompensated trainings, the participant explained that "we asked for it [payment], we didn't get it...end of story." Others expressed frustrations with low pay in general, with one respondent describing doing the "working class hustle" to get by, and having to wear a "middle class mask" on campus by hiding her financial difficulties. Others described being on public assistance, although this was described as a "temporary vow of poverty."

In terms of salary amount, respondents believed budget crisis made it impossible to pay higher wages, explaining "there's nothing that can be done so let's just forget about it." Another challenged the idea that she *should* be paid more. "I would almost feel bad asking for more money because when I think about all the money the university has given me...and I'm getting a PhD for free, so I almost would feel like I'm stealing from the university because I'm so grateful."

Respondents at the non-union site were overall negative about their healthcare benefits. One participant reported frustrations with the university having a "top notch" health facility on campus but providing sub-par insurance to graduate students. Others said that the healthcare "doesn't do much" and were frustrated by a lack of eye and dental care. Other grievances included a lack of adequate prescription coverage, with one



recounting that he reached his insurance limit on medications and had to “go without” and continue working while suffering from anxiety, headaches, and asthma, while others described not being able to get birth control or allergy medicine. Neither ethnic nor gender differences impacted how participants viewed their material benefits.

Non-unionized participants accepted that they had to consistently work beyond their stated work assignments, expressing a belief that this was common to all graduate teaching assistants and noting that they were “not mad about it” they “just do it.” Several participants explained that they did not keep track of their work hours because, as one participant expressed, “It’s a slippery slope of madness because you’ll definitely go over and you don’t want to know it.” In contrast, unionized participants were more likely to state that their workloads average out within their specified work assignment over the course of the semester. These participants noted that they can “stand up” if feeling pressured to work beyond their assignment or will consciously adjust their work to stay within their assignments. These workers described that being overworked in your teaching assignment can be detrimental to progressing through your program. According to one participant:

I've made a conscious decision to be a worse teacher this semester because I decided that I need to get my Master's, that's more important to me than being the best teacher I can be. And that kind of sucks, because I want to be a good teacher. I don't want to let my students down, but I want to get my Master's and get out of here.

Neither ethnicity nor gender differences impacted how non-unionized and unionized employees discussed the issue of being over-worked or how they cope with working beyond their stated hours.

The presence of a union also impacted how participants assessed and understood their future work plans. Many participants at the non-union site did not plan to work in a research intensive university, based on their negative experiences during graduate school, specifically in feeling that faculty members undervalued undergraduate education and disrespected both graduate and undergraduate students. Participants at the non-union site were concerned about the academic job market, but discounted warnings from professors as “alarmist rhetoric,” likely reflecting the sense of alienation these participants described from faculty members. No participants at the unionized research site expressed this feeling of disrespect from faculty members.

Also, non-unionized participants were more likely to understand their work opportunities by relying on the experiences of previously-matriculated friends from their departments whereas unionized participants were more likely to rely on departmental placement rate statistics. Unionized participants were also more likely to be aware of the difficulties associated with adjunct labor, and those at the non-unionized site were more willing to seek employment as an adjunct, part-time instructor.

Differences in future work plans may be partially attributable to different rates of academic job placements in participants’ departments. However, academic job placement rates were not found to be higher within departments at the unionized site than within those at the non-unionized site, based on National Research Council data on these departments (National Research Council 2011). This difference may be partially attributable to disciplinary differences as communications students were a significantly larger percent of non-unionized participants. However, the differences found in work plans were not found to differ by discipline at either the unionized or the non-unionized

site. Also, there was no discernible difference on future work plans based on race or gender. For example, the Latino non-unionized participant, like his white coworkers, was willing to take an adjunct position. Further, differences between unionized and non-unionized participants were found to be robust in relation to gender differences. When asked about ways to improve issues of social and economic justice within their universities, non-unionized workers were more likely than unionized workers to focus on their personal frustrations, whereas unionized participants consistently described issues facing their students. Non-unionized workers believed that they have no recourse because there is no line of communication to decision makers (administrators and faculty members) who do not understand graduate employees' struggles, or in the case of faculty members, had no power themselves to improve graduate employees' lives. These workers further believed that universities were forced to act unjustly because of budget crises. Non-unionized workers expressed that they were thankful to the institutions, and that the opportunity to work and receive a degree overpowered their frustrations. According to one participant, "When you're being told you're lucky to be here, it kind of makes you feel a little guilty to question the university." Another respondent joked that trying to make the university more just would be complaining: "It's like, hey, thanks for the free tuition that I would like more money. I want to complain." Further, such complaining could be seen by peers and others as "admitting weakness."

One unionized worker addressed this kind of sentiment, saying that "the university is telling you that this is the best situation that you can be in" but that you must "be able to objectively look at your situation and realize there is more to it than you are being told." Further, these non-unionized respondents expressed that they are

overworked and have no energy to be activists. In discussing social justice education, non-unionized workers were also more likely than unionized workers to believe that issues of social and economic justice do not impact their students or that the topics relevant to justice are too abstract for their classrooms. Unionized workers who were not active in their unions also gave a low appraisal of their agency to make change on campus. This stemmed mainly from a fear of retaliation by the university.

Ethnicity was not found to impact participants' understandings of social and economic justice and their personal agency. For example, the only Latino participant at the non-union site was similar to other non-union workers in this regard, both seeing concerns of economic and social justice as "abstract." Gender differences were not found to affect understandings of personal agency.

Non-unionized employees also displayed more cynicism in terms of collective agency and unionization. Some were concerned about "forced" unionism, saying that they believe unions should be voluntary and that they personally are too "independent" to join a union or be bound by union decisions. Almost half expressed that they had never thought about unions in higher education. These respondents further expressed that graduate employees are too ignorant to run a functioning union that "mattered in the scheme of things." For example, non-unionized participants described how...

we would need someone from the outside who knew what they were doing to tell us how to approach it [organizing] instead of just a bunch of graduate students thinking, oh, we've seen some movies about striking.

Others agreed that graduate employees would need "advocates coming in to intervene in situations from outside the university or from higher up in administration" and another expressed that "I'd almost want someone to tell me what I needed."

Unionized workers were almost completely pro-union, both in general and within higher education, expressing that non-unionized workers are more abused by their employers who “can just do whatever they want to you” if there is no union. Another expressed that “everyone should have a union” explaining that “corporations and the government and the university” do not treat workers well “out of the goodness of their heart. They do it because they’re bound by a contract, a legal document.”

Ethnic differences were not found to impact views of collective agency. The one Latino participant at the non-union site was consistently anti-union, similar to non-unionized whites. Gender was also not found to impact views of unions in higher education. Both female and male non-union participants were critical of unions in general and unsure of their place in higher education.

When asked how they believed their experiences as graduate employees may have differed had a union been in place when they arrived, some non-unionized workers mentioned that a union might help with “communication channels,” summer employment, or more clear work expectations. However, a majority of non-union workers expressed that it would likely make no difference and that minuscule benefits would not be worth their time. One participant expressed that, "I think people have this glamorized movie version of what would happen if 30 graduate students got together and protested or something....Probably nothing would happen." When unionized workers were asked how their experiences as graduate employees might have differed if there was no GEU in place at their university, unionized participants credited their union with increased job security and improved health benefits and “the pushback against overloading the grad students” with increasing class sizes.

Ethnic differences were not found to impact views of TA unions. For example, although the one Latino participant at the non-union site recognized that a union could theoretically improve her work situation, she felt that this would not be the case in practice. Like whites at the non-union site, this participant described herself as “apathetic about the idea of a union.” Disciplinary differences among unionized and non-unionized participants were also not found to impact views of TA unions.

Differences between unionized and non-unionized participants in relation to their views of unions may be partially attributable to geographic differences. Union density in the state of the unionized site was 5.7% greater than that in the state of the non-unionized site in 2011(Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). However, graduate programs recruit students from geographically-disperse areas, which should mitigate this geographic difference among graduate employees. Further research will need to be done at a non-union site in a state with high union density and a union site with low union density to better discern the impact of overall union density to better discern how these social geographic differences impact respondents’ views of unions.

Demographic variables, including gender and race, were not found to significantly impact the differences found between unionized and non-unionized participants. For example, both non-unionized females and males expressed feelings of disrespect by professors and were expressed generally anti-union sentiments. The one Latino non-unionized participant did not significantly differ from his white non-union counterparts in these respects. A majority of non-union participants were from communications, a significantly higher percentage than among unionized participants. Non-union participants had a higher mean number of years in graduate school, which may increase

their socialization into hegemonic discourses. Although Ehrenberg et al. (2002) found that longer times in a program increased support for a union, this was not found to mitigate participants' views of unions in higher education.

*Increased activity, understanding, and agency*

Increased union activity, beyond just the presence of a union, was found to lead to more adversarial views of administrators and more positive views of faculty. Further, active union members saw their employment more consistently as exploitative and displayed a greater sense of their agency in relation to their future employment plans. Active union participants were found overall to display less frustration and fear than other participants in relation to their employment and future employment prospects. Furthermore, increased union activity led to a deeper understanding of graduate employees' political opportunity.

Compared to other participants, those who are active in their union were distinct from those not-active in the union in their understanding of university administration, relying on personal experiences with administrators to form their understandings. Non-unionized participants and those not active in the union thought of the administration as an undifferentiated mass, if they thought of them at all, with five non-unionized and one unionized participants expressing that they don't ever think about the administrations. Union stewards based their opinions of administrators on personal experiences, with one saying, "Given my personal work as a steward and the struggle that we had... I definitely, especially from the Dean of undergraduate students... He made it pretty damn clear that he really didn't care...whether we were starving to death or not." This perceived lack of

concern lead this participant to criticize the administration, saying “I don’t find them to be fostering an R1 status at this university.” Although expressing that the administrations do not respect them, participants not active in their union mainly saw the administration as ignorant of their problems or callous: “I don’t think they’re oppressing us, I just don’t think they care.”

Closely related to heightened anxiety about the job market, participants not active in their union believed that previous generations of academic workers “had a much more open path” in relation to the job market, were able to “blunder into” stable work, and did not have heavy teaching loads early in their careers. These participants expressed resentment that these professors now expected unreasonable work from graduate employees, with one noting that “I don’t have the luxury of just sort of waltzing into it... We’re in a much more structured place than they were.” Active union members did not express this resentment.

Active union members were also more consistent than any other groups in understanding their work situations as exploitative, as other participants were more likely to argue that their tuition-wavers made “exploitation... too strong a word” to describe their working relation to the university. Active union participants addressed this belief, noting that they were being exploited regardless, with one participant explaining that “You think you just hit the jackpot and then it takes about a year to realize... that there is more to it than you are being told.” For this participant, such a statement likely reflects his own experience coming to a more clear understanding of his employment. In his first year, he was highly involved as a union steward in a contract conflict, which likely



served as a catalyst for this development. As one unionized participant expressed, "You've got to make sure that your rights as a worker and as a student are still respected."

Active union members were also consistently less anxious about future employment plans. When asked about alternative plans if tenure-track work could not be found, non-unionized participants and those not active in the union laughed uncomfortably and joked about prostitution, "ditch digging," and suicide as possible alternatives. Inactive union members explained that an inability to find tenure-track employment would be devastating. For one, this would mean that he had worked "for nothing" in graduate school. Another expressed that not finding tenure-track employment would be "the worst thing imaginable" and that he would "spiral into a deep depression. These anxieties are likely related to an internalization of neoliberal subjectivity in which not finding stable employment is understood as personal failure and brings self-blame. Active union members, in comparison, immediately gave well-thought-out answers indicating more nuanced understandings of the academic job market and personal agency in their future employment.

Academic job placement rates in departments with active union members were found to be higher than all other groups. Therefore, decreases in anxiety related to future job placement may be partially attributed to differences in academic job placement rates. However, active union member participants described their future employment plans in relation to personal strategies to navigate the job market. These participants showed less fear and anxiety than non-active union members within their same disciplines. Further, non-union participants' departments had higher academic job placement rates than those of inactive union members, but this did not lead to decreased anxiety among this group.

Not only relying on departmental placement rates, active union members made proactive and conscious decisions to structure their education and research experiences in a way that made them increasingly marketable. For example, one respondent explained that she specifically chose her program because of its high tenure-track placement rate and that she has “consciously chosen areas [within her field] that I know will benefit me as far as being marketable.” Another described seeking out advice and guidance from professors which helped him to focus his studies “toward things that are interesting to me, that I love...but at the same time wide enough to be a good-looking candidate eventually;” He further explained that he has “slowly been accumulating degrees from different programs” to increase his marketability in interdisciplinary fields, noting this belief that “academia is going toward more interdisciplinary fields.”

Those participants not active in their union and lacking a union recognized that graduate employees have structural power in some contexts, but when asked directly about taking action, these participants expressed that they have no structural power. Non-unionized participants expressed that without TAs “the university doesn’t function.” One non-unionized respondent explained that if graduate employees went on strike and didn’t grade undergraduates’ finals, then “they [administrators and professors] would be screwed.” One participant not-active in the union described that if a graduate employee strike happened, “the university would fall apart.” However, when asked directly about ways that graduate employees can fight for justice within the university, these participants expressed general hopelessness and cynicism that any action would make a difference. One respondent sarcastically mentioned a graduate employee strike, which was met with laughter from all participants. Another participant in this group said, "It's

hard to implement change when the university doesn't want it." Several participants explained that graduate employees "don't have a lot of power, and another explained that a graduate employee strike would "probably just get struck down."

Participants at the non-union site suggested actions to address their personal grievances, including writing letters or attending faculty senate meetings, but each participant who suggested such an action followed their statement with an admission that they doubt any such actions would make change. According to one participant, "I think most people don't feel like they are entitled to try and open that line of communication or if they did that they'd just be ignored." For both of these groups, only top-down actions, including government regulation or the chance hiring of a sympathetic administrator, can create change. In contrast, active union participants did not discuss graduate employee structural power at the institutional level, but rather discussed agency at the department level, basing these assessments in their personal work in departmental struggles.

Participants active in their union were more likely to describe challenging social and economic injustices in optimistic terms whereas other participants were more likely to express that injustices are immutable features of their universities, with one describing her frustrations as "annoying things that are probably happening everywhere." One respondent at the non-union site expressed that their public university "operates more like a corporation, you know, based on profits, which we have to do based on the budget crisis." While admitting that this hurts poorer students, this participant believed that the university has no choice.

Non-unionized participants and participants not active in their unions saw bringing awareness of social injustices as their main means of addressing these issues, but

were more likely to admit that this, too, would not lead to social change except that their students might be more thoughtful when voting. These participants were more likely than those active in their unions to discuss fear of retaliation if they were to be active in social justice causes on campus. These respondents also feared student complaints and negative student evaluations if they were to address social justice issues in the classroom. This fear was described in relation to anxieties related to a competitive job market and paying off student loan debt; they questioned whether collective political action and activism is worth jeopardizing their careers or even if such action could possibly be effective.

In contrast, active union participants described applying concerns of justice to the university through using both education and collective action to foster a sense of collectivity and giving oppressed groups the tools to advocate for their own interests, as well as advocating for lowering or eliminating tuition to increase university access for poor and marginalized populations. While inactive union members had a vague sense that their union fought for social justice concerns on campus, active union participants gave specific examples of how their union fights against racism and homophobia within the university, describing union activism as a concrete way to make the university more just. According to one respondent, the union created “social justice in the practical sense” by “creating a sense of collectivity and a sense that as a collective you can make a better situation for everybody.” Specifically, the union creates spaces, through “meet and greets” for marginalized groups to come together and build a sense of community and is “very welcoming to people from all ways of life.”

Active union participants were also unique in describing the personal benefits they gained from their union. When asked how their experiences would differ without a

union, union stewards credited the union for increased material benefits, citing similar examples to those who are not active in the union. However, these participants also discussed the nonmaterial benefits of increased respect for graduate employees in relation to administrators and faculty members. Active union participants also described the union as a community of support and solidarity as an important component of their social networks.

Demographic differences between active union members and other participants may be partially attributable to some differences found. For example, there was a significantly higher percent of Latino participants who were active with their union than all other groups. These participants were more vocal about confrontations with administrators, for example. However, each of these participants attributed this feeling to personal experiences in union issue campaigns. Latino participants in the non-union group and in the inactive union group were not found to be more confrontational toward administrators than whites within their analytic category. The small number of active union members in this study (3) complicates an analysis based on other differences, such as gender, ethnicity, and discipline. Further research will be needed to better understand if these attributes impact views of graduate employee work and organizing.

### *Findings Summary*

Some aspects of work-life were impacted by neither the presence of a union nor different levels of activity with the union. All groups highly valued interactions with students, student development and peer support among graduate employees and planned to continue working in education. All groups also shared similar difficulties including a

lack of support from faculty in relation to teaching, unevenness in their work, feeling undervalued as teachers by university administrations, and concerns over an increased reliance on part-time instructors and teaching assistants.

The presence of a union primarily affected other aspects of how participants described their work-life. Unionized workers were more positive in describing their work, had more positive views of faculty, and expressed fewer frustrations with their pay and healthcare. Unionized participants were less likely than their non-unionized counterparts to express wanting to leave research intensive institutions, and displayed more understanding of the academic job market. Non-unionized workers both expressed more frustrations than unionized workers and felt that these problems were immutable and common to all graduate teaching assistants. Non-unionized workers also believed that graduate employees were both too busy and too unskilled to collectively challenge these problems, and that any attempt would be ineffective. Further, these workers expressed gratitude to their university and described any work to change dynamics as “complaining.” In contrast, unionized participants displayed more agency in dealing with workloads beyond their assignments than non-unionized workers.

Non-unionized workers were considerably more anti-union than unionized participants and were cynical that graduate employees were skillful enough to create a union that mattered. Non-unionized workers also expressed gratitude to and dependence on the universities, further curbing actions whereas unionized workers were more likely to believe that institutions had to be forced to respect workers through collective bargaining. While not unanimous, non-unionized workers generally believed that a union would not improve their working conditions whereas unionized workers credited their

union for both increased material benefits including healthcare access, as well as job stability and reduced workload.

Being active with the GEU was found to have a small impact on work-life specifically, but greatly increased respondents' sense of agency, both individually and collectively, in advocating for their own needs and wider community needs. Active union participants allowed themselves to "dream big," imagining the possibility of larger structural and cultural changes than other participants. These respondents were consistently more community-oriented than other participants.

Although being active in the union was found to have less impact on descriptions of work-life, active union members did have a more clearly adversarial view of the administration and understood their work situation as one of exploitation while those not active in the union thought little about administration and did not believe they were being exploited. Active union members also displayed less anxiety than other participants in terms of retaliation on the job and in terms of their future job searches, displaying more personal agency in their employment through discussing personal strategies to navigate the academic job market.

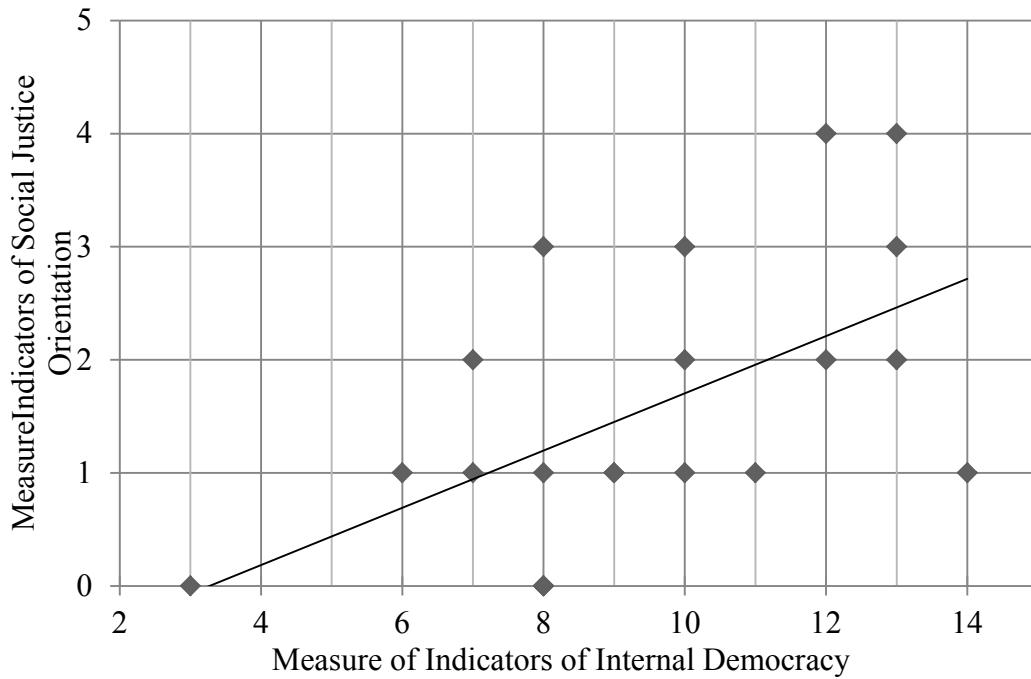
Active union members also saw the union in different ways from not-active members. Union stewards consistently referred to experiences working with the union as a major source of inspiration. While all unionized participants credited their union for increased material benefits and reduced workload, active participants also credited the union with increased respect on the job and described the union as an important aspect of their social network.

Although there were other demographic differences between non-unionized participants, inactive union members, and active union members, these differences were not found to significantly impact participants' views of their work above and beyond union affiliation and levels of union activity. For example, the non-unionized Latino participant was consistently more similar to non-unionized whites than to unionized Latinos in each of the differences found between these groups. The only significant difference between male and female non-unionized employees was how they described being disrespected by faculty, with females recounting more personal stories. However, the presence of a union and union activity was found to impact whether or not participants described being disrespected. Further data will need to be collected to better understand how race, gender, departmental affiliation, work roles, and geography impact respondents in relation to my research questions. This is particularly the case when analyzing the impacts of increased union activity, as the small number of active union members (3) complicates more in-depth analysis of the effects of other differences between this group and others.



**Figure 4.1:** Correlation of Indicators of Internal Democracy and Social Justice Orientation among Graduate Employee Union Locals' Constitutions and/or Bylaws (N=21) ( $r=0.58^{**}$ ): Source: (Author's analysis)

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## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: DOES THE UNION MAKE US STRONG?

*How do graduate employees experience their work?*

It is we who plowed the prairies; built the cities where they trade;\*<sup>1</sup>  
Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;\*  
Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have  
made...\*

In relation to my descriptive research questions, I found that graduate employees' experiences, particularly in relation to peer, faculty, and institutional support for teaching, are congruent with the theories of the "neoliberal university" and "academic capitalism" (Dowling 2008; Slaughter and Rhoades 2000; Slaughter and Rhoades 2009). Graduate employees recognize just as Fairweather (2005) found, that teacher work is undervalued in the neoliberal university. These findings mirror Boice's (1991) study of new faculty members as well, providing further evidence of the general devaluation of teaching in this area. It is not only graduate employees' teaching that is devalued, but all teaching in the university.

Participants' high appraisal of and reliance on peer teaching indicate that the supposedly highly individualistic and competitive underpinnings of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter and Leslie 1997) have not fully taken hold in contemporary higher education. It is possible that academic capitalist outlooks and strategies apply primarily to the realm of research productivity, which is understood as more highly valued in terms of hiring and promotion. In the absence of high-quality training and support from faculty members, graduate teaching assistants must rely on bonds of social capital among one another to improve their teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> (\*) indicates lyrics to "Solidarity Forever" by Ralph Chaplin (1914)

Further, the lack of faculty support in terms of teaching would also indicate that faculty members do not value graduate students' work as teaching assistants, or are compelled by institutional incentive structures to put more energy into research productivity than to supporting graduate teaching assistants' work (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Particularly at the non-union site, participants reported more constructive and positive relationships with research mentors than with those faculty members they assisted in teaching undergraduates. These structural pressures are exacerbated by the growing ratio of graduate teaching assistants to faculty members (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000; U.S. Department of Education 2010b).

While some participants claimed that they never thought about the administration, the remainder felt that administrators did not value their work. Participants expressed a common concern over the increased reliance of part-time instructors as an important factor in the undervaluing of teacher work and an increase in teacher exploitation (Dowling 2008; Moser 2001). Despite this, teaching remained important to participants, as indicated by the majority of each group describing interactions with students and student development as the most rewarding aspect of their work.

The literature indicates that feelings of being disrespected and undervalued as teachers are a common theme in the framing of GEUs, casting graduate employees as defenders of public education and academic values (Rhoades and Rhoads 2000; Rhoads and Rhoades 2005). That non-unionized graduate employees also noted disrespect as teachers in relation to administrators and faculty members indicates that this organizing grievance arises not from organizers' desire to form unions, but rather from wide-spread experiences of graduate teaching assistants. Therefore this framing serves the process of

“cognitive liberation” for graduate employees, because it articulates a meaning and cause for their experiences and feelings (McAdam 1982; Nepstad 1997; Bell 2010).

*What difference does a union make on work experiences and views of work?*

We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old...\*  
For the union makes us strong.\*

I found that the presence of a GEU primarily impacted participants’ perceptions of their work experiences. The presence of a union created a “new world” for graduate employees. Non-unionized participants expressed more problems in their work-life, specifically in relation to workload, pay, and healthcare. Thus, the presence of a union was found to mitigate many aspects of the “proletarianization” of academic work characteristic of the neoliberal university (Aronowitz 1998; Aronowitz and Difazio 2010; Castree and Sparke 2000). In this sense, unionization primarily improved workers’ material benefits. This finding was congruent with others’ findings (Rhoades and Rhoads 2003) concerning graduate employee grievances.

Wickens (2008) suggests that one effect of graduate employee unionization is decreased teacher workload, allowing workers more time to devote to studies and scholarly activities and thereby improving relationships with faculty members. Unionized participants recognized that being overworked leads to delaying progress in their programs of study, and credited the union with a cap on the number of students each semester for whom a graduate teaching assistant can be responsible. At the departmental level, the union was credited with fighting (although not always successfully) attempts to increase TA course loads. Unionized participants reported being generally able to stay

within the hours of their work assignments, while non-unionized participants consistently reported working beyond their stated work assignments.

Ehrenberg et al. (2002), in the only study to measure the impacts of GEU organizing on graduate employees' pay, found that GEUs make little impact in this regard. However, as noted above, there is reason to question the research methods used in Ehrenberg et al.'s study. In this study, non-unionized employees described money shortages at length whereas unionized employees did not. Although non-unionized participants earned less overall than unionized participants, their cost of living was also significantly lower. Participants also discussed the instability of pay more than the actual payment amounts, which was not addressed by Ehrenberg et al. Specifically, non-unionized employees expressed fear at the instability of summer employment and frustrations over not being paid correctly. Not only did unionized participants not express such fears and frustrations, they also attributed the union to increased stability in pay.

To date, there have not been published investigations into the impact of graduate employee unionizing on healthcare benefits. However, there were major discrepancies in how unionized and non-unionized participants described their healthcare, with non-unionized participants expressing frustration with their healthcare benefits. Unionized employees consistently mentioned the union's fights with the university to improve graduate employee healthcare and believed that improved healthcare access was a major benefit of unionization.

As hierarchical organs of civil society characterized by organically connecting academic workers to the capitalist class, universities were expected to disseminate

hegemonic views of neoliberalism and academic capitalism (Forgacs 2000). This expectation was validated with the current findings. All graduate employees had to interact with these hegemonic views in some way. In contrast, as democratic organs of civil society characterized by autonomy, GEUs were expected to formulate autonomous views contrary to both neoliberalism and academic capitalism, springing from graduate employees' shared experiences, or "life-worlds" and collectively-identified interests (Habermas 1981: 36). This expectation was also validated with the current research, as non-unionized employees displayed the greatest internalization of hegemonic ideas whereas active union members displayed the most consistent expression of autonomous and counterhegemonic views.

An analysis of the literature on GEUs and new social movements indicates that the presence of a union and increased activity with the union would impact graduate employees' views of their work and their agency (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003; Freeman 2000). This expectation was confirmed through investigation. These differences in understanding can be attributed to both different experiences and the impact of GEU framing of graduate employment and the university structure. Those views which were different between unionized and non-unionized employees may be attributed to differences in work experiences, whereas those views that differed mainly between active and inactive union members may be mainly attributed to experiences organizing and GEU framing.

Overall, unionized employees were more positive in their descriptions of their work-lives than were non-unionized employees. The improved material benefits that come from unionization, however, are also related to increased psychological,

postmaterialist benefits of improved feelings of respect and dignity (Habermas 1981; Buechler 1995). Non-unionized participants were more negative overall in assessing their work experiences, but this was especially prevalent in expressing views of being disrespected by and alienated from faculty members in relation to their teaching work. These negative views increased the likelihood that non-unionized employees would express a desire to leave research intensive universities for employment at other institutional types. This finding is in-line with the literature which indicates that the presence of a GEU primarily impacts graduate employees' experiences through a positive impact on the relationship between faculty members and graduate employees (Wickens 2008; also see Lee et al. 2004; Julius and Gumpert 2002; Hewitt 2000).

Further, non-unionized participants also compared their teaching to that offered by professors, indicating that they take more time preparing for their classes and often provide better instruction than professors. This self-comparison of non-unionized participants was explained in terms of teaching assistants having "more of a sense of responsibility" for undergraduate education and having to work hard to "prove" themselves. Both of these explanations reflect an internalization of neoliberal subjectivity (Hasinoff 2008). Other findings indicate that these employees have also internalized other hegemonic beliefs in relation to the university administration.

Specifically, non-unionized participants were more likely to believe that administrators highly value undergraduate education and to express gratitude and dependence on the university. In contrast, unionized employees did not express these hegemonic views. This indicates that unionized employees' views of their employment stem more from autonomous and collective practices among graduate employees than for

their non-unionized counterparts. The GEU, as an organ of civil society, thus allowed active members to take part in the formation of these views and for inactive members to be exposed to both these autonomous views and the struggles from which these views sprang.

Autonomous views allow these employees to understand their work in ways that are more consistent with their experiences or “life-worlds.” To the extent that individuals are indoctrinated into hegemonic views which reinforce the “economic and administrative system” of “power and money,” (Habermas 1981: 36) individuals will react to their own experiences with confusion, frustration, alienation and apathy. These feelings are generated and reinforced through daily “limit situations” in which an intuitive understanding arising spontaneously from experience is unable to form one’s cognitive understanding of a situation, leading to resignation and apathy (Petruzzi 1998: 310; Ronald and Roskelly 2001: 615; Lloyd 1972: 10; Bell 2010: 51; Leonardo 2004: 15). Being embedded in a social situation, these individuals are unable to view their situation and experiences objectively (Lloyd 1972). For example, non-unionized participants’ feelings of being undervalued by administrators as teachers were contrary to their hegemonic beliefs that administrators care about the quality of undergraduate education.

#### *Unionization and belief amplification: Attribution*

Limit situations are overcome by “limit acts” through which participants come to recognize their experiences and intuitive understandings in cognitive terms (Glass 2001: 16, 18; Ronald and Roskelly 2001: 620; Bell 2010: 52). These processes are closely related to the processes of “belief amplification” (Snow et al. 1986: 469). One belief



amplification process is attribution, through which individuals come to assign responsibility for their problems on powerful individuals (Snow et al. 1986). While belief amplification is generally understood as arising from collective processes of creating understanding, the findings in this study indicate that attribution can also be fostered more passively through exposure to a collective struggle, even if one is not directly involved in the fight or lacks bonds of social capital with those who are active in the struggle.

This more passive belief amplification stems from a recognition that activists are fighting on their behalf and a shared identity with activists as fellow graduate employees. For example, inactive union members described the union in positive terms and recognized personal benefits from active union members' struggles. Thus, while not directly engaged in the formation of meaning central to belief amplification, these workers were still impacted by GEU framing that encouraged a recognition of their collective self-interests. Thus, union members were more likely than non-unionized participants to cast administrators in adversarial terms specifically related to those aspects of work-life that union members had fought to improve, specifically pay and healthcare. For non-union members, who had never witnessed a collective struggle among graduate employees, their increased hegemonic views toward administration caused the process of attribution of their problems to take the form of a limit situation.

While many non-unionized participants' problems stemmed from administrators' cost-saving measures, they did not hold administrators responsible but rather blamed wider impersonal economic dynamics for their problems. For example, one participant attributed poor healthcare in the following way: "the overhead is so high that they'd

[administrators] have to...I don't know." Poor pay and rising fees and tuition were attributed to the global economic slump, because of which the university had no option but to "operate more like a corporation." The failure to attribute their problems to the individuals capable of addressing them, non-union study participants accepted that poverty simply "comes along with the job" and that their problems are "just the way things are." Beyond denying administrative responsibility, some non-unionized participants praised administrators as acting "responsibly" and in the best interest of the university as a whole. These views are definitively hegemonic and indicate a non-critical acceptance of the neoliberal ideology (Forgacs 2000; Harvey 2005; Castree and Sparke 2000).

#### *Increased activity and views of work*

Whereas the above differences in views of work and views of graduate employees' agency likely stem from experiences on the job, those ideas expressed only by active union members can be attributed to both their experiences as organizers and the GEU framing which springs from these experiences and interactions with other active union members. The impact of GEU framing would be expected to be greater among active union participants because of their increased social capital within the union, and therefore increased exposure to and participation in creating this framing. When asked about how their experiences have been impacted by the presence of their union, only active union members described that union as a source of solidarity and support, and an important aspect of their social networks.

*Belief amplification: Severity of problems and attribution*

Now we stand outcast and starving midst the wonders we have made;\*  
But the union makes us strong.\*  
Is there aught we hold in common with the greedy parasite,\*  
Who would lash us into serfdom and would crush us with his might?\*  
They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn\*

Different ways of viewing and understanding work-life, work are primarily related to the belief amplification process by which individuals come to see their problems as serious and unjust (Snow et al. 1986). Although all participants saw their problems as unjust, active union members saw their problems as more serious. Others undermined the seriousness of their grievances by describing their problems as temporary. In this way, these participants relied on the promise of delayed gratification to be found in future employment. Delayed gratification is described by Weber (Collins 1990) as an important element of the “capitalist spirit,” and therefore this reliance on future returns further indicates that these participants have more fully internalized a capitalist work-ethic central to neoliberal subjectivity. In contrast, unionized participants warned that threats to their rights as workers are serious enough to warrant collective action.

The attribution process of belief amplification was described above in detailing the differences between inactive union members and non-union members. However, active union members were found to be unique from all other members in the consistency of their attribution of problems to administrators. Active union members’ experiences in negotiation with administrators allowed them to see the administration as a collective body of individuals, whereas other participants were more likely to express that they never thought of the administration and to describe the administration as an undifferentiated mass.

Beyond this different understanding of administrators, active union members saw their work relationship to administrators in different terms. Unlike others, active union members were consistent in describing their work situations as exploitative, thereby casting themselves as having conflicting interests and an antagonistic relationship with administrators. Other participants recognized that part-time faculty were exploited, but were hesitant to apply this term to themselves. For these participants, tuition-wavers made “exploitation...too strong a word” to apply to their personal work situation. Active union members challenged this view, noting that they are still providing more value to the university than they are receiving. Active union members’ consistency that they are exploited is more in-line with findings in the literature (Moser 2001; Dowling 2008: 814) and can also serve to increase affinity with other workers’ struggles.

For all study participants except for active union members, discussion of exploitation was a limit situation. Non-unionized participants could not see administrators as exploiting them because of their gratitude to the university. One participant described himself as being “thankful” to provide “cheap labor” to the university because otherwise “maybe I wouldn’t have gotten a job and I’m glad I did.” Active union members challenged this view, with one active union participant explaining that union activities allowed her to view her work-situation more objectively and question the university’s claims that their current situation is “the best situation that you can be in.” In challenging both the concept that graduate employees should be grateful to the institutions and that graduate employees are not exploited, these active union members engaged in a limit act, attempting to aid inactive union members’ process of cognitive liberation.

Discussing exploitation was seen as a limit situation among most non-union and inactive stud participants. Among non-unionized participants in both focus groups, the very question of exploitation was first met with uncomfortable laughter, signaling discomfort with the term. These participants also displayed divergent and confused conceptualizations of the concept. For example, although one participant at the non-union originally said that she feels like “exploited labor,” upon further questioning she explained that she felt “psychologically exploited” in having less prestige than professors. Other participants, excluding those active in their union, understood exploitation as being paid less than other workers for the same work<sup>2</sup>, or expressed that they did not feel exploited because their current work is more highly compensated than previous work experiences.

Further, active union members were the only group to attribute their problems directly to administrators. Active union members were also the only participants to display specifically counterhegemonic views toward administrators, describing their acts as being against the common interests of the university community. Other groups were more likely to blame faculty members for their problems. Wickens (2008) found that GEUs typically frame faculty members in a positive light, and this was reflected in the current findings, indicating that active union members were more closely aligned with the GEU movement’s understanding of university power structures. While all union members had more positive views of faculty members, than non-unionized participants, active union members were more likely to express turning to faculty for advice and support. These were the only participants to believe that faculty members also need a

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<sup>2</sup> This may indicate an increased rate of exploitation, but does not capture the notion of being paid only a portion of the value one generates in the labor process.

union to represent their collective interests and that GEUs and faculty unions should work together as allies in fighting administrators' policies.

*Increased activity, increased personal agency*

Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one;\*  
But the union makes us strong.\*

In describing personal, individual agency at work, non-unionized employees again displayed an increased internalization of neoliberal subjectivity, as these employees were more willing to accept being dominated on the job, and were more likely to express being motivated by fear and shame. Non-unionized graduate employees also anticipated and accepted being exploited and dominated later in their careers. These participants were also more likely than others to value “flexibility” and “independence” in relation to their work, both of which are central to neoliberal subjectivity. Unionized employees displayed more individual agency in regard to difficulties at work, being more likely to describe “standing up” as a “right” if they felt pressured to work beyond their stated work assignment. Non-unionized employees stated that not only did they consistently work beyond their work assignments, but that they were “not mad about it” and they “just did it.” These workers expressed that any individual attempt to create change would be both “complaining” and an admission of weakness that would cause personal shame.

These participants were also more likely to express that they do not feel “entitled” to express their difficulties. This feeling is important because these participants also expressed that, to the extent that administrators and faculty members could alleviate graduate employees' problems, they did not do so out of ignorance of these problems and not because they had conflicting interests or values. The only distant possibility of such

for these participants was found in increased communication about their problems to powerful individuals, opening lines of communication by using the tools that, according to these participants “grad students are good at” such as writing letters. However, each suggested action was followed by an admission that such actions were unlikely to create change. For these participants, top-down solutions were the only recourse, including the chance hiring of a sympathetic administrator, the enlightened conversion of an administrator to recognize graduate employees’ difficulties, increased government regulation, or someone “with power” coming in from the outside.

These authoritarian views reflect the rigid hierarchical structure described in the neoliberal university theory. Unable to recognize collective means of addressing their problems, non-union participants express a reliance on the notion of a powerful savior figure or liberator. The individual outlooks these participants held, a central aspect of neoliberal subjectivity, made them unable to imagine collective solutions.

All members saw education as a main means of creating change in the university and society as a whole. However, non-unionized participants questioned the efficacy of these actions, being more likely than unionized participants to believe that justice issues would be irrelevant to their students. For these participants, social justice education was more likely to be seen as both unnecessary, as justice issues did not impact their students, and ineffective (Hasinoff 2008).

Non-unionized graduate employees were also more likely to describe themselves in other terms reflecting an acceptance of neoliberal subjectivity, describing themselves as more “hard working” and “responsible” than faculty members in their teacher work, and describing themselves as being too “independent” to be bound by unions’ collective

decisions (Hasinoff 2008). They were also more likely to be “thankful” for employment, even if it was exploitative. For example, non-unionized employees were more likely to accept adjunct faculty work as a possibility for future employment even while displaying an understanding of many of the difficulties commonly associated with this work.

Increased action with the union was found to diminish the internalization of neoliberal subjectivity more fully than simply being a GEU member. All groups understood the necessity of being able to “reinvent themselves for the labor market” (Hasinoff 2008: 392) as a condition of working in the neoliberal university. Active union members were willing to proactively seek experiences, and therefore to generate human capital that was seen as marketable. However, the experiences they chose were also highly valued to them as individuals, thus indicating an ability to reinvent themselves on their own terms. Compared to active union members, other participants were consistently more likely to express fear of negative student comments and poor student reviews which would lead to negative sanctions. This fear motivated these participants to exclude some topics from their classrooms, even if they thought such topics would improve their teaching. Thus, non-unionized and inactive union participants were more likely to reinvent themselves in ways they felt would make themselves more marketable at the expense of their stated educational values.

*Questioning agency: A description of a limit situation*

When asked about ways that graduate employees can make an impact in their universities, non-unionized participants responded in ways characteristic of a limit situation, indicating that the possibility of taking action was in conflict with their beliefs about their agency. For example, one group responded by asking to repeat the question,



even finding it difficult to repeat the terms used: “You mean...how could, *graduate students*...do that?” This response allowed the group more time to be silent and process the question. After I confirmed that this was the question posed, the group responded with a 3 second pause before a participant began to laugh, signaling both a discomfort with the question and indicating to others that her response should not be taken seriously. Through her laughing, the participant responded with mock inquisitiveness: “strike?” This answer was met with laughter from all participants. After this laughter subsided, there were 5.5 seconds of silence before another participant spoke up saying “I don’t know how or where the administration is (on issues of social justice).” Participants then began to again recount their frustrations and to discuss individual, not collective, responses.

When the same question was posed to the focus group containing union stewards, there was also a long pause. However, this was because two stewards began to speak at the same time and then silently negotiated (using body language) which would go first, with one saying that she would “step back” to allow more voices in the conversation. The conversation immediately turned to campaigns that could be pushed for within the union to address injustices on campus.

*Union presence, activity, and collective agency*

Is there anything left for us but to organize and fight?\*

For the union makes us strong.\*

Increased political opportunities for oppressed and exploited people to challenge power structures and resist repression by elites serve as the necessary structural backdrop for union and social movement organizing. The literature would indicate that the

increased reliance on graduate employee labor for undergraduate education creates political opportunities for graduate employee unionizing (Dixon et al. 2008). This is further evidenced by the increase of GEU locals. However, increased political opportunities are likely to remain latent if frame amplification and those described as “cognitive liberation” are absent.

The first two processes of belief amplification, believing one’s problems are serious and unjust and attributing one’s problems to powerful individuals, lay the necessary foundation for the third belief amplification process whereby individuals overcome “fatalism” and recognize their collective agency by coming to see collective action as both necessary and effective (Snow et al. 1986; Bell 2010). An understanding of this agency was found to be starkly different among different groups of participants. While non-unionized participants displayed no collective agency, inactive union members were cautiously optimistic about their agency and active union members were both optimistic and more nuanced about their collective agency.

Throughout the focus groups with non-unionized employees, these participants expressed that collective action would be ineffective, indicating a fatalism that would be expected when lacking belief amplification processes associated with fomenting collective action. For these participants, their grievances were immutable and common to all graduate teaching assistants. In the views of non-unionized participants, graduate employees are also too busy to take collective actions, and are too unskilled to create and sustain an organization “that mattered in the scheme of things.” In this way, their perceived lack of individual agency and collective agency were mutually reinforcing.

In contrast, unionized employees had either witnessed or experienced the benefits that collective action had brought to their work-lives and therefore displayed more agency than non-unionized employees in regard to difficulties at work. Unionized employees described collective negotiations with the union as important in fighting for improved healthcare, “pushing back” against administrative plans to increase class sizes and teaching loads, and improving funding. However, inactive participants saw their collective power as “limited.”

But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn\*.  
We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn\*  
That the union makes us strong.\*

Active union members displayed the most collective agency, and expressed this agency in different terms than all other participants. According to one inactive participant:

It’s hard to get behind the [union] movement thing, like when they march through campus with facemasks. It’s kind of like, well, I have class. I mean, even though the union stands for us...

This increase in collective agency among active unionists can be attributed to both their experiences with the union and GEU framing. Consistent with the findings concerning personal agency, all participants excluding active union members expressed fear that taking political action on campus would lead to retaliation and hinder future job searches. Inactive employees believed that a strike action could lead to improvements in their lives, but saw the likelihood of such action as unlikely, and believed campus protests were ineffective. In contrast, active union members described collective contract agreement negotiations, which they had been involved in at the departmental and university-wide level, as necessary and effective means of taking collective action.

The literature indicates that graduate employees have collective political opportunities to create change, stemming from an increasing reliance on graduate employee labor for undergraduate education (Dixon et al. 2008). This was further validated by NCES statistics showing that graduate employee employment is increasing in relation to full-time faculty employment (U.S. Department of Education 2010b). The findings suggest that active union members more fully realized their structural power than other participants. For other participants, their daily experiences on the job are ones of limit situations in relation to their structural power.

Participants excluding active union members intuitively recognize their latent political leverage, but these recognitions came about spontaneously, particularly when describing their frustrations. For example, non-unionized TAs said that their departments “are dependent on TAs to run;” that “the university doesn’t function” without their labor; that if graduate employees went on strike and didn’t grade undergraduates’ finals, then “they [administrators and professors] would be screwed.” One inactive unionized participant described that if graduate employees went on strike, then “the university would fall apart.”

This intuitive recognition became hidden to these participants when asked directly about their structural power, and they then denied their collective agency. Non-unionized employees and inactive union members, in this more direct context of asking about their ability to make change, denied any “power” on the job, while inactive union members described their power as limited. For non-unionized participants, a TA strike would “probably just get struck down” because of their lack of structural power.

Further, inactive participants, while recognizing the benefits of collective bargaining, felt that only strike actions would lead to fundamental change, but discounted such an action as unlikely. In contrast, active union members never mentioned striking directly as a solution, but rather described the positive benefits of collective negotiations and the “not-so veiled threat” of a strike as curbing administrators’ actions and increasing respect for graduate employees on campus.

### *Conclusion*

My findings and analysis indicate support for the theories of the neoliberal university and academic capitalism (Castree and Sparke 2000; Rhoades and Slaughter 1997). In general, while graduate teaching assistants highly value the personal benefits from their work and their contribution to their universities’ educational mission, they feel disrespected and undervalued by administration. This finding gives credence to common GEU frames which cast graduate teaching assistants as defenders of academic values.

I found the presence of a GEU to alter significantly how participants described their work and improved their relations with faculty members, in line with the current research. Unionization was also found to decrease participants’ grievances concerning material aspects of their work, including healthcare, workload and pay. While Ehrenberg et al. (2002) found that the presence of a union does not impact the amount of payments, GEU members credited the union with increased stability of employment, and therefore increased stability in pay. A lack of stability was a central grievance of non-unionized employees.

I found increased union activity to impact primarily graduate employees' views of their work more fully reflect the GEU movement framing described in the literature (Rhoads and Rhoades 2005; Rhoades and Rhoads 2003; Freeman 2000; Wickens 2008; Dawson 2007). For example, active graduate union members were more likely to see their work as exploitative and have more adversarial views of administrators. They were also more likely than other participants to express positive views of faculty members. These active union members also displayed more personal and collective agency, and considerably fewer fears and anxieties concerning present and future employment. Further, active union members were the most likely to recognize problems in the university that are associated with the concept of the neoliberal university, and therefore were the most willing to express alternative visions. These participants also understood their collective political opportunity in relation to university administration more clearly than all other participants. I attribute these findings to increased experiences within the union, and increased social capital with other active union members, which facilitate processes of frame amplification and cognitive liberation.

#### *Limitations and further research*

The primary limitation of this research is the small sample size (N=16), particularly of inactive union members (N=4) and active union members (N=3). Thus, there is a question as to the generalizability of these findings in relation to the effects of unionization and of union activity until further research can be done. Also, demographic differences, particularly in gender, race, and types of employment, between my three analytic categories (non-unionized, inactive union members, and active union members)

may cause some differences found in these two groups. This was not found to be the case, but my small sample size makes these causal attributions difficult to fully discount. Further research will be helpful in more deeply understanding how these characteristics impact respondents' experiences and views. Also, because I was not able to randomly select participants, there was likely some selection bias among my participants, in that those who volunteered for the study may have valued teaching more highly than graduate teaching assistants as a whole.

While I found "social movement unionism" to be conceptually verified through an analysis of GEU documents, more research is needed to understand if GEUs overall display more social movement tendencies than labor unions in general. Further, more research is needed to investigate the differences in impacts on members between those locals which were found to have high social movement union scores and those with low scores on this index.

## Appendix A: Indices of Social Movement Unionism

### *Indications of union democracy*

1. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution describe the organization as "democratic"?
2. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify officer election by majority vote? \*<sup>3</sup>
3. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify nominations open to all members?\*
4. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution define roles for elected officials?\*
5. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify term limits for elected officials?
6. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that stewards directly elected?
7. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify a stated steward/employee ratio?
8. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that officers may be recalled by the membership?
9. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that stewards can be recalled by their unit?
10. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that there will be regular, scheduled membership meetings?\*
11. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that meetings can be called by membership?
12. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that there is direct membership voting on contracts?\*
13. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that contract negotiation teams elected?
14. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that membership votes to allow a strike?\*
15. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution specify that contract negotiation meetings are open to general membership?
16. Do the union bylaws and/or constitution mention institutional/workplace democracy as a goal?

### *Indications of social justice orientation*

1. Does the constitution describe purpose as "justice"?
2. Are there committees/caucuses based on issues or identity?
3. Are there social justice issue based committees?
4. Does the constitution include anti-discrimination beyond state and federal specifications?

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<sup>3</sup> The presence of an asterisk (\*) signifies that this indication was derived from Levi et al.'s (2009) measures of union democracy.



## Appendix B: Focus Group Moderator Facilitation Guide<sup>4</sup>

### *Introductory questions and views of work*

1. Let's start out by introducing ourselves. Please introduce yourself – name, department, and your favorite aspect of college teaching?\*
2. In general, how would you describe your experiences working in academia as a TA?\*
3. How would you describe your working relationship with other graduate teaching assistants?\*

  - a. Do you engage in collaboration or receive support from other teaching assistants?\*

4. In your role as a teacher, how would you describe your working relationship with faculty?\*

  - a. Do you feel you have autonomy over your work?\*

5. Do you ever feel overworked in your TA responsibilities?\*
6. What about the university administration? Do you think in general that TAs are valued?\*

### *Transition questions*

1. Do you plan on college teaching as a career? How about a show of hands? [Show of hands. Say out loud.]\*
2. For those of you who do not plan on college teaching as a career, how did you come to that decision?\*
3. For those of you who do plan on teaching, do you plan on pursuing a tenure-track position?\*
4. What do you think the odds are, in your field, of finding a tenure-track job?\*
5. If you do not find a tenure-track position in your field, what kind of work do you see yourself doing?\*
6. Take a minute to write down on one of your cards your thoughts relating to the following words. [Write “Middle Class” and “Working Class” on flipchart.]

  - a. How do you and your own life-history relate to these terms?
  - b. Would anyone like to share what they've written?
    - i. How do you relate to the following word: Middle Class?
    - ii. How do you relate to the following word: Working Class?

7. What do you see as the main difference between “Middle Class” and “Working Class”?

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<sup>4</sup> While the full Facilitation Guide included other sections (Opening remarks, review of confidentiality, setting ground-rules, closing statements), only the questions are included in this appendix.

<sup>5</sup> Those questions followed by an asterisk (\*) indicate questions that informed the current study. Other questions were asked, but these were not included. Rather, the data from these questions will be used in a further study examining more themes.

8. What do you see as the main differences between a “Middle Class” job and a “working class” job?
9. Do you think the US class structure or system is generally fair?
10. What do you think are the main causes of poverty in America?
11. Do you think universities should have affirmative action policies in hiring and student recruitment?
  - a. Why or why not?
12. How important are labor unions for workers, in general, in the United States?
13. How important are labor unions for university teachers?\*

  - a. Teaching assistants?\*
  - b. Part-time instructors?
  - c. Faculty members?\*

14. Do you think university teachers (teaching assistants, part-time instructors, and faculty members) are exploited by their institutions?\*
15. When you think of “social justice,” how does this apply to the university?
16. When you think of “economic justice,” how does this apply to the university as a place of employment?
17. What are some ways that graduate students can get involved in making our universities more just, both socially and economically?\*
18. Do you think your experiences at your university would be significantly different if there was/was not a graduate employee union labor union?\*
  - a. In what ways?\*

*Internal union questions* [Only for those with a union]

1. How often do you volunteer for your TA union?
2. Do you feel the union is important to protecting your working conditions?
3. Do you feel like your voice is valued in your union?
4. What does it mean for an organization to be democratic?
  - a. How democratic do you feel your union is?
5. Do you feel your union is committed to a broad social justice agenda?
  - a. (If yes) In what ways?

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<sup>6</sup> Those questions followed by an asterisk (\*) indicate questions that informed the current study. Other questions were asked, but these were not included. Rather, the data from these questions will be used in a further study examining more themes.

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Vita:

**“Enku” Michael Carl Ide**

Born: April 17, 1983 Hattiesburg, Mississippi, United States

Education:

- 2008. B.A., *summa cum laude*, University of Southern Mississippi: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Department of Spanish

Professional Positions Held:

- 2011 (Summer). Research Assistant. University of Kentucky.
- 2010-2011. Teaching Assistant. University of Kentucky.
- 2009-2010. Intern. Labor Education and Research Project.

Scholastic and Professional Honors:

- 2011. Graduate Research Fellowship. National Science Foundation.
- 2011. 2<sup>nd</sup> Place: Graduate Paper Competition. Anthropologists and Sociologists of Kentucky
- 2010. 1<sup>st</sup> Place: Graduate Paper Competition. Anthropologists and Sociologists of Kentucky
- 2007. Anne Braden Scholarship. Davis Putter Scholarship Fund

Professional Publications

- 2011. “Assignment 1: LGBT Equality.” Review of *The Right to Be Out* by Stewart Biegel. *Against the Current*. April
- 2010. “Bangladeshi Women Garment Workers Strike.” *Labor Notes*. August
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“Enku” Michael C. Ide